

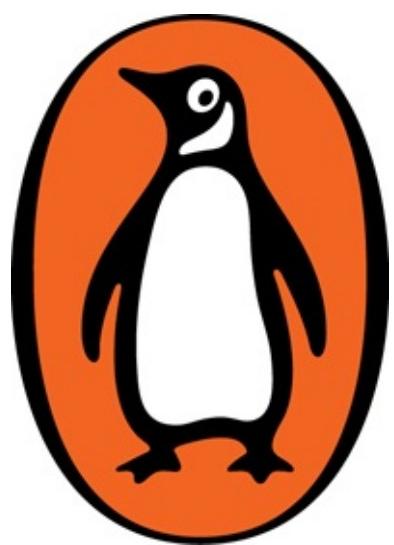
GEORGES

SIMENON

The Dancer at
the Gai-Moulin

INSPECTOR MAIGRET





Georges Simenon

THE DANCER AT THE GAI-MOULIN

Translated by Siân Reynolds



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Between 1931 and 1972 he published seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Inspector Maigret.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points ... 'understand and judge not'.

Penguin is publishing the entire series of Maigret novels.

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THE DANCER AT THE GAI-MOULIN

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1. Adèle and Her Friends

‘Who’s that?’

‘No idea! It’s the first time he’s been in here,’ said Adèle, exhaling the smoke from her cigarette.

And she lazily uncrossed her legs, patted down a lock of hair on her temple, and looked carefully into one of the mirrors round the room, to check her makeup.

She was sitting on a banquette upholstered in crimson plush, in front of a table holding three glasses of port. One young man sat on her left, another on her right.

‘Do you mind, boys?’

She gave them a kindly, confidential smile, stood up, and swinging her hips, walked across the room towards the newcomer’s table.

At a nod from the club owner, the four musicians hired for the evening started crooning along to their instruments. Only one couple was dancing: a woman in pink and the professional dance-partner.

And as almost every night, it felt empty. The room was too large. The mirrors round the walls magnified even further its receding perspectives, punctuated only by the crimson seats and ghostly marble tabletops.

The two young men, now that Adèle no longer sat between them, moved closer together.

‘Charming, isn’t she!’ sighed Jean Chabot, the younger of the two, gazing affectedly towards the dance-floor with half-closed eyes.

'Plenty of zip, as well,' said his friend Delfosse enthusiastically, leaning on a cane with a gold top.

Chabot was perhaps sixteen and a half, and Delfosse, thinner, more sickly looking, with irregular features, no more than eighteen. But they would have protested indignantly if anyone had suggested that they were not blasé connoisseurs of all the pleasures of life.

'I say, Victor!'

Chabot spoke familiarly to the waiter who was passing nearby.

'Do you know the man who just came in?'

'No, but he's ordered champagne.'

And Victor winked.

'Adèle's looking after him.'

He moved off with his tray. The music stopped for a moment, then started up an American-style boston. The owner, standing at the table of the promising customer, was opening the champagne bottle himself, tucking a napkin round its neck.

'Do you think they'll stay open late?' whispered Chabot.

'Two, half past ... as usual.'

'Shall we have another drink?'

They were on edge. The younger one particularly, who was looking at each person in turn with a fixed stare.

'How much do you think there is?'

But Delfosse simply shrugged and said impatiently:

'Shut up, can't you!'

They could see Adèle, almost opposite them, sitting beside the unknown customer, who had ordered champagne. He was a man of about forty, with jet-black hair and a dark complexion, Romanian, or Turkish perhaps, in appearance. He wore a pink silk shirt and a jewelled tie-pin.

He seemed untroubled by the dancer, who was laughing and chatting to him while leaning against his shoulder. When she asked for a smoke, he held out a gold cigarette-case, still looking straight ahead.

Delfosse and Chabot had stopped talking. They pretended to be looking with scorn at the newcomer. But they really admired him intensely! They missed not a

detail, studying the way his tie was knotted, the cut of his suit, and even his casual way with a glass of champagne.

Chabot wore a cheap off-the-peg suit and shoes that had been mended more than once. His friend's clothes, although of better fabric, were ill-matched. Delfosse had the narrow shoulders, hollow chest and fragile silhouette of an adolescent who had clearly shot up too fast.

'Here comes someone else!'

The velvet curtain inside the door had been moved aside. A man was handing his bowler hat to the doorman, then standing still for a moment, surveying the room. He was tall, broad-shouldered and heavily built. He wore a placid expression, and did not even listen to the waiter who wanted to escort him to a table. He sat down at random.

'Got any beer?'

'We only have English beer – stout, pale ale?'

The man shrugged, indicating that he had no preference. The place was no busier than any other night. One couple on the dance-floor. The jazz music carried on, becoming a background noise one hardly noticed. At the bar, a well-dressed customer was playing poker dice with the owner. Adèle sat alongside her companion, who was still taking no notice of her. A typical scene in a small-town nightclub. At one point, three men, all slightly drunk, pushed aside the curtain over the door. The owner hurried across. The musicians played frantically. But the men left, and sounds of laughter came from outside.

As time passed, Chabot and Delfosse began to look more serious. It was as if fatigue had sharpened their features, darkened their skin to a sallow complexion, and drawn circles under their eyes.

'OK now?' asked Chabot, in such a low voice that his companion guessed rather than heard what he said.

No answer. Fingers drumming on the marble tabletop.

Leaning on the stranger's shoulder, Adèle winked from time to time at her two young friends, while maintaining the flirtatious, smiling look she had adopted.

'Victor!'

'Going already? You've got a date?'

In the same way that Adèle was putting on a come-hither expression, he was pretending to look knowing and interested.

'We'll settle up tomorrow, Victor. Got no change tonight.'

'Of course, gentlemen. Goodnight! You're going out that way?'

The two young men were not drunk. But they made their way out as if in a nightmare, without seeing anything.

The Gai-Moulin has two doors. The main entrance is on the street, Rue du Pot-d'Or. That is the way customers normally arrive and leave. But after two a.m., when according to police regulations the club should be closed, a small service entrance leads to an ill-lit and deserted alleyway.

Chabot and Delfosse crossed the dance-floor, passed in front of the stranger's table, replied to the owner's goodnight, and pushed open the door of the washroom. They stopped there a few seconds, without looking at each other.

'I'm scared,' Chabot stammered.

He could see his reflection in the oval mirror. The muffled sounds of the jazz music had followed them in.

'Quick!' said Delfosse, opening another door on to a dark staircase, where the air was damp and cold.

It led to the cellar. The steps were made of brick. From below arose a sickening smell of beer and wine.

'What if someone comes!'

Chabot almost stumbled, as the door swung to behind them, cutting out all the light. His hands moved along the walls covered with saltpetre crystals. He felt someone touch him and gave a start, but it was only his friend.

'Don't move!' the other said.

They could not exactly hear the music. They could guess at it. What could be sensed above all was the beat from the drummer. A rhythm throbbing through the air and bringing back the image of the club's interior with its red velvet seats, the tinkle of glasses and the woman in pink dancing with a man in a tuxedo.

It was cold. Chabot felt the damp penetrating him, and had to make an effort not to sneeze. He put his hand to the nape of his neck, which was freezing. He could hear Delfosse's breathing. Each breath smelled of tobacco.

Someone came into the washroom. The taps ran. A coin clinked into a saucer. Then just the ticking of Delfosse's pocket watch.

'Do you think it's safe to open the door?'

The other youth pinched his arm to make him be quiet. His fingers were cold.

Upstairs, the owner of the club would be starting to look impatiently at the clock. When there were plenty of customers and a lively atmosphere, he did not greatly object to staying open past closing time and risking the attentions of the police. But when the club was almost empty, he suddenly became mindful of the regulations.

‘Gentlemen, we are about to close! It’s two o’clock.’

The young men on the staircase could not hear this. But they could guess what was happening, minute by minute. Victor would be cashing up, then coming over to the bar to check the takings with the boss, while the musicians put away their instruments in their cases and covered the big drum with a green baize cloth.

The other waiter, Joseph, would be piling the chairs on the tables and picking up the ashtrays.

‘Come along please, gentlemen, we’re closing. Adèle, get a move on, hurry up.’

The boss was a thickset Italian, who had been a hotel barman in Cannes, Nice, Biarritz and Paris.

Footsteps in the washroom. Now, he’s coming to bolt the back door leading out to the alleyway. And he turns the key but leaves it in the lock. Won’t he automatically come to close the cellar too, or at least glance inside? He stops for a moment. He must be checking his parting in the mirror. He coughs. The washroom door creaks.

Another five minutes and it will all be done. The Italian, who is always the last to leave, will have pulled down the shutters on the street front, and he’ll be locking up the last door from outside.

And he never pockets all the day’s takings. He just puts the thousand-franc notes in his wallet. The rest stays in the drawer behind the bar, a drawer with such a flimsy lock that a stout penknife can force it.

All the lights are out.

‘Come on!’ whispers Delfosse.

‘Not yet, wait a bit.’

Now they are alone in the building, but they continue to speak in low voices. They cannot see one another. Each of them feels his face go pale, his skin tighten

and his lips turn dry.

‘What if someone’s stayed behind?’

‘Was I scared when we did my father’s safe?’

Delfosse is truculent, almost threatening.

‘Perhaps there won’t be anything in the drawer.’

It’s a kind of vertigo. Chabot feels more nauseated than when he has drunk too much. Now that he has ventured into the dark space above the cellar, he hasn’t the courage to come out. He’s on the verge of collapsing in tears on the steps.

‘Let’s go!’

‘No, wait, he might come back.’

Five minutes pass. Then another five, because Chabot wants at all costs to gain some time. His shoelace is undone. He ties it up in the dark, blindly, because he’s afraid of tripping over and making a noise.

‘I didn’t think you were such a coward. Come on, in you go.’

Because Delfosse doesn’t want to go first. He pushes his companion in front of him with trembling hands. The door from the cellar steps opens. A tap is dripping into a basin. There is a smell of soap and disinfectant.

Chabot knows that the second door, the one leading inside the club, will squeak. He’s expecting the sound. But still it makes a cold shiver run down his spine.

In the darkness, the club seems vast, like a cathedral: a great empty space. There is still a little warmth seeping from the radiators.

‘Let’s have some light,’ Chabot whispers.

Delfosse strikes a match. They stop a moment to catch their breath, and work out how far they still have to go. And suddenly the match falls to the ground, as Delfosse gives a sharp cry and rushes back towards the washroom door. In the dark, he loses his way, returns and bumps into Chabot.

‘Quick, let’s get out!’

His words sound hoarse, inarticulate.

Chabot too has seen something. But it was hard to make it out. A body lying on the floor by the bar? Jet-black hair.

They don’t dare move. The matchbox is on the floor, but they can’t see it.

‘Your matches!’

‘I’ve lost them.’

One of them stumbles into a chair. The other asks:

‘Is that you?’

‘This way! I’m holding the door.’

The tap is still dripping. That helps calm them down, a first step towards escape.

‘Shall we switch on the light?’

‘Are you crazy?’

Their hands search for the bolt on the back door.

‘It’s hard to shift.’

Footsteps outside in the street. They freeze. And wait. They catch a few words:

‘... well, *I* think if England hadn’t ...’

The voices move away. Perhaps the police, talking about politics.

‘Can you open it?’

But Delfosse is incapable of moving. He leans up against the door and puts his hands to his heaving chest.

‘His mouth was open,’ he stammers.

The key finally turns. Fresh air. Light from the street lamp glistens on the cobbles in the alleyway. They both want to run. They don’t even think of closing the door behind them. But down there at the corner is the main street, Rue du Pont-d’Avroy, where there are people. They don’t look at each other. It seems to Chabot that his body is hollow, that he’s making vague movements in a world made of cottonwool. Even the sounds seem to come from a long way off.

‘Do you think he’s dead? Was it the Turk?’

‘It was him. I recognized him. His mouth was open ... And one eye.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘One eye was open and the other closed.’

Then angrily:

‘I’m thirsty!’

Now they’re on Rue du Pont-d’Avroy. All the cafés are shut. The only place open is a frying shop selling beer, mussels, pickled herring and chips.

‘Shall we go there?’

The cook, in white overalls, is seeing to his burners. A woman eating in the corner gives the two friends an alluring smile.

‘Two beers! And some chips! And some mussels!’

And after their first helping, they order some more. They’re hungry. Terribly hungry. And they’re already on their fourth beer!

They still can’t look one another in the eye. They eat voraciously. Outside it’s dark, and the few passers-by are walking quickly.

‘How much?’

Fresh panic. Will they even have enough between them to pay for their supper? Seven plus two fifty, and three and sixty cents and ... Eighteen francs seventy-five.

Just one franc left for a tip!

Into the streets. Iron shutters drawn down on the shopfronts. Gas lamps, and in the distance the footsteps of policemen on the beat. The two young men cross over the Meuse. Delfosse doesn’t open his mouth, looks straight ahead of him, his mind so far removed from present reality that he doesn’t notice when his friend speaks to him.

And Chabot, to avoid being left alone, to prolong their reassuring companionship, stops as they reach the door of a prosperous-looking house, in the best street of the district.

‘Come back a little way with me,’ he implores.

‘No. I’m feeling ill.’

That’s true. They both feel unwell. Chabot has only glimpsed the corpse for an instant, but his imagination has done the rest.

‘Do you think it really was the Turk?’

They are calling him ‘the Turk’ for want of any other name. Delfosse does not reply. He has quietly put his key into the lock. Through the gloom they can see a wide corridor and a brass umbrella stand.

‘See you tomorrow, then?’

‘The Pélican?’

But the door is already closing. Suddenly a wave of giddiness. Oh, to be back home, and in bed! Then this will all be over, surely?

And now Chabot is alone in the deserted streets, walking quickly, breaking into a run, hesitating at street corners, then dashing off like a madman. In the main square, Place du Congrès, he keeps away from the trees. He slows down

when he glimpses a passer-by in the distance. But the unknown figure turns off in another direction.

Rue de la Loi. Two-storey houses. A doorway.

Jean Chabot feels for his keys, puts one in the lock, switches on the light and goes towards the kitchen with its glass-panelled door, where there are still some embers glowing in the range.

He has to turn back, because he forgot to shut the front door. It's warm inside. There's a piece of paper on the white oilcloth covering the kitchen table, with a few words scribbled in pencil:

You'll find a mutton chop in the sideboard and a slice of tart in the larder. Goodnight. Father.

Jean stares at it dazedly, opens the sideboard, sees the chop, and the sight of it makes him feel sick. On top of the sideboard is a pot holding a plant with blue flowers, forget-me-nots perhaps.

That must mean Aunt Maria called round. She always brings some kind of house plant. Her home on Quai Saint-Léonard is full of them. And she always gives you detailed instructions about how to care for them.

Jean switches off the light, and tiptoes upstairs in his stocking feet. He goes past the lodgers' bedrooms on the first floor landing.

Another flight up, and he's at attic level. Cool air comes in from the roof. As he reaches the landing, a mattress creaks. Someone is awake, his father or his mother. He opens his bedroom door.

A muffled voice:

'Is that you, Jean?'

Right, he'd better go and say goodnight to his parents. He goes into their room. The air is warm and stuffy. They must have been in bed for hours.

'Late, isn't it?'

'Oh not very ...'

'You really ought ...'

But no, his father doesn't have the courage to scold him. Or guesses that it would be no use.

'Goodnight, son.'

Jean bends down and kisses a damp forehead.

'You're freezing cold. You—'

'Yes, it's cold outside.'

'Did you find the chop? Your Aunt Maria brought the tart.'

'I'd already eaten with my friends.'

His mother turns over in her sleep and her chignon uncoils on to the pillow.

'Goodnight.'

He can't stand any more of this. In his own room, he doesn't even put the light on. He throws down his jacket and lies on the bed, pressing his face into the pillow. He isn't crying. He can't. But he tries to catch his breath. His limbs are trembling, his whole body is shivering in spasms, as if he were seriously ill.

He just doesn't want to make the bedsprings creak. He wants to stifle the sob he can feel in his throat, because he guesses that his father, who hardly ever sleeps, will be lying awake next door, listening.

An image grows inside his head, a word echoes, swells, becomes monstrously loud as if it is about to destroy everything: the Turk!

And he is tormented, oppressed, stifled, as if in the grasp of something terrible – until suddenly the sun is streaming through the skylight, and his father is standing at the foot of the bed, muttering weakly, as if afraid of being too stern:

'Look, you really shouldn't, Jean ... You were drinking again, weren't you? You didn't even get undressed!'

From downstairs comes the smell of coffee, eggs and bacon. Trucks are passing in the streets. Doors slam. A cock crows.



2. Petty Cash

Elbows on the table, Jean Chabot pushed away his plate, keeping his eyes fixed on the little courtyard visible through the net curtains, its whitewashed walls dazzling in the sunlight.

His father, observing him surreptitiously between mouthfuls, was trying to maintain some kind of conversation.

‘Do you know if it’s true that the big building in Rue Féronstrée is up for sale? Someone asked me about it yesterday at the office. Perhaps you could find out at work ...’

But Madame Chabot, who was also keeping a watchful eye on her son while preparing vegetables to make soup, interrupted:

‘You’re not eating anything?’

‘I’m not hungry, mother.’

‘Because you got drunk again last night, that’s why! Own up!’

‘No.’

‘If you think it isn’t obvious! Your eyes are bloodshot! You look like death warmed up! What’s the point of killing myself trying to feed you to build you up! Come on, at least eat your eggs.’

Jean wouldn’t have been able to, not for a fortune. His chest felt constricted. And the placid atmosphere at home, the smell of bacon and coffee, the white walls, the soup which his mother had begun cooking, everything made him feel sick. He was in a hurry to be outside, and above all to find out. He jumped at every sound from the street.

‘Got to go.’

'It's not time yet. You were out with Delfosse last night, weren't you? And he still keeps coming round here for you! A rich kid who does nothing because his parents have money! That boy's a bad influence, if you ask me! And *he* doesn't have to get up early to go to the office, does he?'

Monsieur Chabot said nothing, but kept eating his breakfast, his eyes on his plate to avoid taking sides. One of the lodgers came down the stairs, a Polish student who went straight outside, heading for the university. They could hear another getting up, in the room overhead.

'Mark my words, Jean, this will end in tears! Ask your father if he went out on the town at your age.'

And Jean Chabot did indeed have bloodshot eyes and drawn features. A reddish sore had appeared on his forehead.

'I'm off,' he said again, looking at the clock.

Just then someone rattled the flap of the letterbox. This was the method used by members of the household or friends, the bell being used only by strangers. Jean hastened to open the door and found himself facing Delfosse, who asked:

'You coming?'

'Yes, let me get my hat.'

'Come inside, Delfosse!' cried Madame Chabot from the kitchen. 'I was just telling Jean, this has got to stop! He's ruining his health. If you want to gad about all night, that's up to your parents. But Jean ...'

Delfosse, tall and thin, even paler in the face than Jean, hung his head with an awkward smile.

'Jean has to earn his living. We're not made of money! You're intelligent enough to know that, so I'll thank you to leave him alone.'

'Are you coming?' whispered Jean, squirming with embarrassment.

'Really, madame, I promise that we—' Delfosse stammered.

'What time did you get in last night?'

'Oh, I don't know, one o'clock perhaps.'

'Jean's already admitted that it was past two!'

'Mother, I've got to get to the office.'

He had his hat on and pushed Delfosse out into the passageway. Monsieur Chabot got up in turn and pulled his coat on.

Outside, as in every street in Liège at that hour of day, housewives were washing the steps and the pavements, cartloads of vegetables and coal were drawing up at doorways, and the cries of street vendors could be heard echoing from one district to another.

‘Well?’

The two youths were now round the corner and could allow their anxiety to appear.

‘Nothing! This morning’s paper didn’t mention anything. Perhaps they haven’t found the—’

Delfosse was wearing a peaked student cap. It was the time of day when students flocked to the university, almost a procession of them crossing the bridge over the Meuse.

‘My mother’s furious. She blames you.’

They walked through the market place, threading their way between baskets of fruit and vegetables, treading cabbage and lettuce leaves underfoot. Jean’s eyes were glazed.

‘And what about the money? It’s the fifteenth.’

They crossed the road, to avoid going past a tobacconist to whom they owed fifty francs or so.

‘I know. This morning I looked in my father’s wallet. He only had big notes in there.’

And Delfosse added in a lower voice:

‘Don’t worry. I’ll go round to my uncle’s in Rue Léopold. I can usually manage to get left alone in the shop.’

Jean knew the shop he meant, the main chocolate emporium in Liège. He imagined his friend slipping his hand into the till.

‘When will I see you?’

‘I’ll wait for you at midday.’

They were reaching Lhoest’s, the solicitor’s where Chabot worked as an office-boy. They shook hands without looking at each other and Jean had an uneasy feeling, as if his friend’s handshake was different from usual.

It was true that now they were accomplices.

Jean's desk was in the outer office. As the newest recruit, his job was mostly sticking stamps on envelopes, sorting the mail and running errands.

That morning, he worked without a word, without looking at anyone, as though he wished to be inconspicuous. He was wary above all of the senior clerk, a severe-faced man of about fifty, on whom his job depended.

At eleven o'clock, nothing had yet happened, but a little before midday the clerk came over to him.

'Have you got the accounts for the petty cash, Chabot?'

Jean had prepared his answer to this all morning and recited, looking sideways:

'Sorry, Monsieur Hosay, but I put a different suit on, and I left the notebook and money at home. I'll give it to you this afternoon.'

He was white-faced. The senior clerk looked surprised.

'Are you unwell?'

'No ... er ... I don't know. Maybe a little.'

The petty cash was kept separate from the other accounts: it was the money used to buy stamps, and pay for postage or other minor everyday expenses. Twice a month, on the 15th and the 30th, Jean was given a certain sum and he was supposed to write down all the payments in a notebook.

The office staff left for lunch. Outside, Jean looked around for Delfosse, and saw him not far from the tobacconist's window, smoking a gold-tipped cigarette.

'Well?'

'I've paid this one off!'

They fell into step. They needed to feel surrounded by people.

'Let's go to the Pélican. I went to my uncle's. I only had a few seconds. I put my hand in and took more than I meant to—'

'How much?'

'Nearly two thousand.'

The figure terrified Chabot.

'Here's three hundred for the petty cash. And we'll share the rest.'

'No!'

They were both equally on edge, with the difference that Delfosse's intensity was almost threatening.

'Why not? Don't we always share everything?'

‘I don’t need the money.’

‘Neither do I.’

They glanced automatically up at the stone balcony on the first floor of a building: this was where Adèle, the dancer at the Gai-Moulin, lived in a furnished room.

‘You haven’t been down there have you?’

‘I went past the club, Rue du Pot-d’Or. The doors were open, like every morning. Victor and Joseph were sweeping the floor.’

Jean clenched his fingers, making the joints crack.

‘But you *did* see him, didn’t you, last night ...?’

‘I’m sure it was the Turk,’ said Delfosse firmly, with a shiver.

‘And there weren’t any police in the street?’

‘No, nothing. It all looked normal. Victor saw me and said hello.’

They went into the Pélican, sat at a table looking on to the street and ordered English beer. And Jean immediately noticed another customer, practically facing him.

‘Don’t turn round. Look in the mirror. He was there last night in ... You know what I mean.’

‘That big fellow? Yes, I recognize him.’

It was the customer who had come last of all into the Gai-Moulin, a large imposing-looking man, who had been drinking beer.

‘He can’t be from Liège.’

‘He’s smoking French tobacco. Careful, he’s watching us.’

‘Waiter,’ Delfosse called. ‘How much? And we owed you – forty-two, was it?’ He held out a hundred-franc note, letting others be seen.

‘Keep some for yourself.’

They didn’t feel comfortable anywhere. Hardly had they sat down than they were setting off again and, in his anxiety, Chabot turned round.

‘That man’s following us! At any rate, he’s behind us.’

‘Shut up. You’ll get me scared now. Why would he be following us?’

‘They must have found the ... the Turk by now. Or else he wasn’t dead.’

‘Shut up, can’t you,’ snarled Delfosse, more angrily.

They went another few hundred metres in silence.

‘Do you think we should go back there tonight?’

'Yes, of course. It'd look funny if we didn't.'

'I say! Perhaps Adèle knows something?'

Jean was so jumpy that he had no idea where to look, what to say. He dared not turn round, but behind him he could sense the presence of the man with broad shoulders.

'If he crosses the Meuse when we do, it means he's following us!'

'Are you going home?'

'Yes, I have to. My mother's furious.'

He might almost have burst into tears right there in the street.

'He's coming on to the bridge! You see, he is following us.'

'Shut up. See you tonight. This is my house.'

'René?'

'What?'

'I don't want to keep all that money. Look—'

But Delfosse was going into his house with a shrug of his shoulders. Jean walked on more quickly, glancing in shop windows to check whether he was still being followed. In the calm streets of the district on the other side of the Meuse, no further doubt was possible. His legs began to tremble. He almost had to stop, feeling dizzy. But on the contrary, he walked even faster, as if drawn onwards by fear.

When he reached the house, his mother asked him:

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing.'

'You're as white as a sheet.'

And then, angrily:

'This is a fine thing, isn't it? At your age, getting into such a state. Where were you last night? Trailing about with what kind of people? I don't understand why your father doesn't take a firmer line with you. Come on. Eat up.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Still?'

'Mother, please leave me alone. I don't feel well. I don't know what it is.'

But Madame Chabot's piercing gaze showed no sympathy. She was a sharp, fussy little woman, on the go from morning to night.

'If you're not well, I'll call the doctor.'

‘No, no, please ...’

Footsteps on the stairs. Through the glass panel in the kitchen door, they could see the head of one of the students. He knocked, then looked in, his face anxious and wary.

‘Madame Chabot, do you know the man who’s walking up and down in the street?’

He had a strong East European accent, and blazing eyes. He got excited at the least occasion.

He was older than most students. But although he was officially enrolled at the university, he never attended any lectures. They knew he was Georgian, and that he was involved in politics back home. He claimed he was a nobleman.

‘What man, Monsieur Bogdanowski?’

‘Come and see.’

He drew her across to the dining room, which overlooked the street. Jean hesitated to follow them, but in the end he too went to the window.

‘He’s been there a quarter of an hour, walking up and down. I know what that means! He’s from the police.’

‘No,’ said Madame Chabot with a show of optimism. ‘You see police everywhere! He’s just waiting for someone.’

The Georgian gave her a doubtful look and went back upstairs, muttering to himself in his own language. Jean had recognized the man with broad shoulders.

‘You, come and eat something. Stop fussing, or it’s off to bed with you, and the doctor’ll be round.’

Monsieur Chabot did not usually come home for lunch. They ate in the kitchen, where Madame Chabot never sat down, coming and going between table and stove all the time. While Jean, head bent, tried to swallow a few mouthfuls, she observed him, and suddenly noticed something about his appearance.

‘Now, where did you get that tie?’

‘I ... er, René gave it me.’

‘René, always blessed René! And you don’t have enough self-respect to ...? I’m ashamed for you. These people may have plenty of money, but that doesn’t make them respectable. His parents aren’t even married!’

‘Maman!’

He usually called her ‘Mother’, but he wanted to try to win her over. He was desperate; all he wanted was a bit of peace for the few hours he had to spend at home. He imagined the unknown man pacing the street, just in front of the school he had attended as a child.

‘No, son! You’re going off the rails, let me tell you! It’s time for it to stop, if you don’t want to turn out like your Uncle Henri.’

That was the nightmare prospect, the uncle you sometimes encountered, either reeling drunk or else up a ladder, working as a house painter.

‘And he’d had an education! He could have been anything.’

Jean stood up, his mouth full, literally snatched his hat from the hallstand and fled.

In Liège, some newspapers have a morning edition, but the version most people read comes out at two p.m. Chabot walked to the centre of town in a sort of daze, the bright sunshine almost blinding him, and only came to when he was across the Meuse and heard a newsboy shouting:

‘Read all about it! *Gazette de Liège!* Latest edition. Corpse found in laundry basket! Horrible details! *Gazette de Liège!*’

Only about two metres away from him, the broad-shouldered stranger was buying a paper and waiting for his change. Jean felt in his pocket and found the banknotes he had shoved there hastily, but no coins. So he went on and was soon pushing open the door of his office, where the other staff had already arrived.

‘Five minutes late, Monsieur Chabot!’ noted the senior clerk. ‘It may not be much, but it happens too often.’

‘I’m sorry. The tram … I’ve brought the petty cash.’

He knew that he was not looking himself. His cheeks were burning and sparks seemed to flash before his eyes … Monsieur Hosay glanced through the notebook, checking the totals at the bottom of the pages.

‘A hundred and eighteen francs fifty. That’s what you should have left.’

Jean regretted not having thought of changing the large notes. He could hear the second clerk and the typist discussing the body in the laundry basket.

‘Graphopoulos. Is that a Turkish name?’

‘No, Greek, apparently he was Greek.’

Jean’s ears were buzzing. He took two hundred-franc notes from his pocket. Monsieur Hosay coldly pointed out something that had fallen to the ground: a

third note.

'You seem to be treating your money very casually. Don't you have a wallet?'

'I'm sorry.'

'If the boss saw you putting banknotes straight into your pockets like that ... Well, I don't have any change. You'd better carry over the hundred and eighteen francs fifty. And when that's all gone, ask for more. This afternoon, you're to go round the newspaper offices to put in the legal announcements. It's urgent, they have to be published tomorrow.'

The Turk, the Turk, the Turk!

Once outside, Jean bought a newspaper and stood for a while in the centre of a circle of bystanders since the vendor had to find him some change. He read as he walked along, bumping into other people.

MYSTERY OF CORPSE IN LAUNDRY BASKET!

This morning at about nine o'clock, as he unlocked the gates to the Botanical Gardens, the keeper noticed a large laundry basket in the middle of a lawn. He tried to open it, without success. The basket was fastened with an iron bar attached to a heavy padlock.

He called Officer Leroy, who called in turn on the Chief Inspector of the 4th district. It was ten o'clock before the padlock was finally opened by a locksmith. And then, what a sight greeted their eyes! Inside was a corpse, bent double, and in order to cram it into the space, several vertebrae of the neck had been broken.

The deceased was a man aged about forty, of foreign aspect: his wallet was missing but in his waistcoat pocket was a business card in the name of Ephraim Graphopoulos.

The dead man must have arrived only recently in Liège, since he was not listed on the register of foreign visitors nor on any of the police forms submitted by hoteliers.

The pathologist will carry out a post-mortem this afternoon, but it is thought the man must have been attacked during the night with a heavy blunt instrument, such as a truncheon, iron bar, sandbag or weighted walking stick.

Further details on this affair, which bids fair to cause a sensation, will appear in our next edition.

Newspaper in hand, Jean arrived at the front desk of *La Meuse*, dropped off his legal notices and waited for his receipt.

In the sunshine the town was busy. These were the last fine days of autumn, and stands were being erected on the boulevards for the big October festival.

He looked behind him for the man who had followed him that morning, but saw no one. As he went past the Pélican, he checked that Delfosse, who had no afternoon lectures, was not there. He made a detour by the nightclub, Rue du

Pot-d'Or. The doors of the Gai-Moulin stood open. The dance-floor was in darkness, and it was hard to see the crimson plush seating. Victor was cleaning the windows with a bucket of water and Chabot hurried past to avoid being spotted. His errand took him on to the *Express* and the *Journal de Liège*.

Adèle's balcony fascinated him. He hesitated. He had visited her once before, a month earlier. Delfosse had sworn to him that he had been the dancer's lover. So Jean had knocked at her door at midday, on some flimsy pretext. She had received him in a grubby peignoir, and had carried on with her toilette in front of him, chatting away as if they were old friends.

He hadn't tried anything. But he had rather enjoyed this moment of intimacy.

Now he pushed open the door next to the grocer's shop, went up the dark stairs and knocked.

No reply. But presently he heard shuffling steps on the wooden floorboards, and the door opened, letting out a strong smell of methylated spirits.

'Oh it's you! I thought it was your pal.'

'Why?'

Adèle was already turning back to the little burner on which some curling tongs were placed.

'Oh, I don't know, just an idea. Shut the door, will you, there's a draught.'

At that moment, Chabot felt overcome by a desire to confide in her, to tell her everything, and in any case to be comforted by this woman with the tired eyes, the worn but still-tempting flesh beneath the peignoir, and the red satin slippers in which she tripped round the cluttered bedroom.

On the unmade bed, he saw a copy of the *Gazette de Liège*.



3. The Man with Broad Shoulders

Adèle had just got out of bed, and a tin of condensed milk had leaked near the burner.

‘So your friend isn’t with you?’ she insisted.

Chabot frowned, as he answered in a sulky voice:

‘No, why would he be with me?’

She paid no attention and opened a wardrobe, fetching out a pink silk underslip.

‘Is it true his father’s this rich factory owner?’

Jean had not taken a seat, nor even put his hat down. He watched her coming and going, with a troubled mixture of feelings, part melancholy, part desire, instinctive respect for a woman, and despair.

She wasn’t beautiful, especially now, lounging about in her mules and shabby peignoir. But perhaps, in the familiarity of this intimacy, she held even more allure for him.

How old was she, twenty-five, thirty? She’d certainly seen life. She often talked about Paris, Berlin, Ostend. She mentioned the names of famous nightclubs.

But without any excitement or pride, without showing off. On the contrary. Her main characteristic seemed to be weariness, as could be guessed from the expression in her green eyes, from the casual way she held a cigarette in her mouth, from all her movements and smiles. Weariness with a smile.

‘What does his factory make?’

‘Bikes.’

'That's funny, I once knew a bicycle manufacturer in Saint-Étienne. How old is he?'

'Who, the father?'

'No, René.'

He frowned even more on hearing his friend's first name on her lips.

'Eighteen.'

'Bet he's a bad boy.'

Their familiarity was complete: she was treating Jean Chabot as an equal. By contrast when she talked about René Delfosse, there was a hint of respect in her voice.

Had she guessed that Chabot wasn't rich, that he came from a family probably no better than her own?

'Sit down. You don't mind if I get dressed? Pass me the cigarettes.'

He looked around.

'On the bedside table, that's right.'

Pale-faced, Jean scarcely dared touch the cigarette-case, which he had seen the night before in the hands of the stranger. He looked across at Adèle, whose gown had fallen open to reveal her naked body, and who was now putting on her stockings.

This was even more troubling than before. He blushed deeply, perhaps because of the cigarette-case, perhaps because of the nudity, or more likely a combination of the two. Adèle wasn't only a woman, she was a woman mixed up in a drama, a woman who no doubt had a secret.

'Well?'

He held out the case.

'Got a light?'

His hand shook as he proffered a lighted match. Then she burst out laughing.

'I'll bet you haven't seen all that many women in your life, have you!'

'Oh, of course, I've had women ...'

She laughed harder. And looked him in the face, half closing her eyes.

'You're a funny fellow. An oddball. Pass me my girdle.'

'Did you get back late last night?'

She looked at him with a hint of seriousness.

'What's this? Are you in love, by any chance? And jealous, what's more! Now I see why you looked so cross when I mentioned René. Come on, turn to the wall.'

'You haven't read the papers?'

'I just looked at the serial.'

'That man from last night, he's been killed.'

'You're kidding!'

She didn't seem very bothered. Just curious.

'Who by?'

'They don't know. They found his body in a laundry basket.'

The peignoir was thrown on the bed. Jean turned round as she was pulling down her slip and taking a dress from the cupboard.

'Ah well, that'll cause some trouble for me.'

'When you left the Gai-Moulin, did he come with you?'

'No, I left on my own.'

'Ah!'

'Anyone would think you don't believe me! Do you really imagine I bring all the customers home with me? I'm a dancer, kid. My job is to try and get them to buy a lot of drinks. But once the doors are closed, that's it.'

'Still, with René ...'

He realized that he had put his foot in it.

'What about René?'

'Nothing. He told me—'

'You idiot! Hand on heart, all he did was give me a kiss. Pass me another cigarette.'

And, as she put on her hat:

'Off with you now! I'm going shopping. Come on, shut the door.'

They went down the dark stairs, one after the other.

'Which way are you going?'

'Back to the office.'

'Will you be along tonight?'

The pavement was crowded. They separated and a few minutes later, Jean was sitting at his desk, faced with a pile of envelopes to frank. Without knowing

exactly why, it was sadness, rather than fear, that he felt most strongly. He looked round at the office papered with legal notices and felt disgust.

‘Have you got the receipts?’ asked the senior clerk.

He handed them over.

‘Where’s the one for the *Gazette de Liège*? You’ve forgotten the *Gazette*?’

Catastrophe, disaster! The senior clerk’s tone was dramatic:

‘Chabot, I have to tell you, this cannot go on! Work is work, duty is duty. I’m going to have to talk to the boss. And now I think of it, they tell me you have been seen in night spots where, personally, I have never set foot. To put it bluntly, you’re going off the rails. Look at me when I’m talking to you! And you can wipe that smirk off your face. You hear? This will not do.’

The door slammed. The young man remained alone, sticking down envelopes.

At about this time, Delfosse would be sitting on the terrace at the Pélican, or in the cinema. The clock showed almost five. Chabot watched the second-hand creep forward sixty times until the hour, stood up, took his hat and locked the drawer.

The man with broad shoulders was not outside. It was cooler. As evening approached, swathes of bluish mist rose in the streets, pierced by light from the shop windows and the trams.

‘Read all about it! *Gazette de Liège*!’

Delfosse wasn’t at the Pélican. Chabot looked for him in the other cafés in the centre of town that were their usual haunts. His legs felt heavy and his head so empty that he thought he might go home to bed.

When he reached the house, he immediately sensed that something had happened. The kitchen door was open. Mademoiselle Pauline, the Polish lodger, was leaning over a figure whom Jean could not at first see. He went forward into the room, and the silence was broken by a sob. Mademoiselle Pauline, plain of feature, turned to look at him, and her expression was stern.

‘Just look at your mother, Jean!’

Madame Chabot, wearing her apron, was sitting with her elbows on the table, weeping copiously.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘You should know!’ retorted the Polish girl.

Madame Chabot wiped her reddened eyes, looked at her son, and burst into tears again.

‘He’ll be the death of me! It’s dreadful.’

‘But, mother, what have I done?’

Jean spoke with a voice too neutral, too clear. He was so frightened that he felt paralysed from head to toe.

‘Leave us please, Mademoiselle Pauline, you’re very kind. We’ve always been poor, but we’ve always been honest.’

‘I still don’t understand ...’

The student went out of the room, and they heard her going upstairs. She took care though to leave her bedroom door open.

‘What have you done? Tell me frankly? Your father’ll be home soon. When I think that the whole district will know.’

‘I swear I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Liar! I know you’re lying, since you’ve been off with Delfosse and those ... those women! Half an hour ago, Madame Velden, the greengrocer, came in here, puffing and blowing. And Mademoiselle Pauline was standing right here! And in front of her, Madame Velden said a man had come to ask for information about you and about us. A man who must be from the police! And of course he had to go and pick Madame Velden, the biggest gossip in the district. By now, everyone will know.’

She was on her feet. Automatically, she poured water into the coffee filter. Then took out a tablecloth from a cupboard.

‘That’s what we get for sacrificing ourselves to bring you up! The police asking questions, and maybe even coming to the house. I don’t know what your father will say. But I can tell you *my* father would have thrown you out by now. And when I think you aren’t even seventeen yet! It’s all your father’s fault. He lets you stay out till three in the morning. And when I get cross, he takes your side.’

Without knowing why, Jean felt sure the so-called policeman must be the man with broad shoulders. He stared desperately at the floor.

‘So you’ve got nothing to say for yourself? You won’t own up to whatever it is?’

‘Mother, I haven’t done anything wrong!’

‘Why would the police be after you, if you haven’t done anything?’

‘We don’t know it was the police.’

‘Well, who else would it be?’

Suddenly he found the courage to lie, to end this painful conversation.

‘Perhaps it’s someone who might offer me a job, who’s asking for character references. I don’t earn much where I am now. I’ve been applying to places, trying to find something better.’

She looked at him sharply.

‘Are you lying?’

‘I swear that—’

‘Are you sure you and that Delfosse boy haven’t been up to some mischief?’

‘I promise you, mother.’

‘Well, in that case, you’d better go and talk to Madame Velden. We don’t want her telling everyone the police are after you.’

The key turned in the front door lock. Monsieur Chabot took off his coat and hung it up, came into the kitchen and sat down in his wicker chair.

‘Home already, Jean?’

Then he saw with astonishment his wife’s red eyes and the young man’s sulky expression.

‘What’s going on?’

‘Nothing. I was telling Jean off. I don’t want him coming home at all hours.

As if there was something wrong with being here, with his family.’

And she began laying the table and filling cups. As they ate, Monsieur Chabot read the paper and commented on it.

‘Here’s something that will make a stir. A body in a laundry basket! A foreigner, of course. Probably a spy.’

And changing the subject:

‘Did Monsieur Bogdanowski pay his rent?’

‘Not yet. He says he’s waiting for some money to arrive on Wednesday.’

‘He’s been waiting three weeks. Well, too bad. On Wednesday, you must tell him this can’t go on.’

The atmosphere was heavy, full of familiar smells, with light glinting on the copper-bottomed pans, and the garish colours of an advertising calendar, still on the wall three years later, with newspapers wedged behind it.

Jean ate his food mechanically, and gradually his senses dulled. In these everyday surroundings, he found himself doubting the reality of events outside. So he found it hard to imagine that two hours earlier he had been in the bedroom of a dancer who was putting on her stockings in front of him and letting her peignoir sag open on to her pale, plump, if slightly shopworn flesh.

‘Did you ask about the house?’

‘What house?’

‘The one in Rue Féronstrée.’

‘I ... Oh, I forgot.’

‘As usual!’

‘I hope you’re going to take it easy tonight. You look terrible.’

‘Yes ... I’m staying in.’

‘That’ll be the first time this week!’ said Madame Chabot, who was still not entirely reassured and was keeping a sharp eye on the expressions that crossed her son’s face. The letterbox rattled. Jean, sure it was meant for him, rushed out into the corridor to answer the caller. His parents watched through the glass panel of the kitchen door.

‘That Delfosse again!’ said Madame Chabot. ‘Why can’t he leave Jean alone? If it goes on like this, I’m going to speak to his parents.’

The two young men could be seen whispering in the doorway. Chabot turned round several times to check they could not be overheard. He seemed to be resisting an urgent request.

Then suddenly, without coming back to the kitchen, he called:

‘I won’t be long!’

Madame Chabot got up to try to stop him. But already, with hurried and anxious gestures, he had seized his hat from the stand and run into the street, slamming the door.

‘And you let him carry on like that?’ she snapped at her husband. ‘Is that the kind of respect you get from him? If you would only put your foot down ...’

She had more to say in the same vein, under the lamplight, all the while eating her meal, as Monsieur Chabot glanced sideways at his newspaper, not daring to pick it up until the diatribe was over.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Certain. I recognized him. He used to be the inspector in our district.’

Delfosse looked even more haggard, and as they passed under a gas lamp, his companion saw that he was deathly pale. He was pulling on his cigarette with short distracted intakes of breath.

‘I can’t stand this! It’s been going on for four hours now. Look! Turn round quickly. I can hear his footsteps about a hundred metres behind us.’

They could make out only the silhouette of a man walking past the houses in Rue de la Loi.

‘It started right after lunch … Or maybe before. But I only noticed when I sat down on the terrace of the Pélican. He came to sit at a nearby table. I recognized him. He’s been in the secret police for two years. My father called him in when some metal was stolen from the site. He’s called Gérard or Girard. I don’t know why, but I stood up. It was getting on my nerves. I set off down Rue de la Cathédrale and he started walking behind me. I went into another café. He was waiting a hundred metres down the road. I went into a cinema, the Mondain, and there he was again, sitting three rows away. I don’t know what else I did. I walked, I took trams. It’s these banknotes in my pocket. I’d really like to get rid of them, because if he searches me, I won’t be able to say where I got them. Can’t you say that they’re yours? For instance, that it’s money your boss gave you to run an errand?’

‘No!’

Sweat was beading on Delfosse’s forehead, and his expression was both troubled and angry.

‘But we’ve got to do *something* … He’s going to end up confronting us. I went to your place because after all, we were together when—’

‘You haven’t eaten?’

‘I’m not hungry. What if I was to throw the money into the river from the bridge?’

‘He’d see you!’

‘I could always go into a café and throw them down the lavatory. Or, no, listen! Let’s go and sit in a café and then *you* can go into the washroom, while he goes on watching me.’

‘What if he follows me?’

‘He won’t. And after all, you have the right to lock the door.’

They were still in the district across the Meuse, where the streets were broad, but deserted and badly lit.

Behind them, they could hear the regular footsteps of the policeman, who did not seem to be trying to hide his presence.

'Why don't we go into the Gai-Moulin? That would look more natural. We go there nearly every night. And if we *had* killed the Turk, of course we'd keep away.'

'But it's too early.'

'We can wait.'

They fell silent. They crossed the Meuse and wandered through the streets, checking from time to time that Girard was still following them. In Rue du Pot-d'Or, they saw the illuminated sign of the nightclub, which was just opening its doors.

They recalled their flight away from it the previous evening, and it took a great effort on their part to approach it. Victor was at the door, a napkin over his arm, which meant that there were no customers to speak of.

'Let's go in.'

'Good evening, young gents! You haven't seen Adèle, have you?'

'No. Hasn't she arrived?'

'Not yet! It's odd, because she's always punctual. Come in. A glass of port?'

'Port, yes.'

The place was virtually empty. The band wasn't bothering to play. The musicians were chatting as they kept an eye on the door. The owner, wearing a tuxedo, was placing miniature American and British flags behind the bar.

'Good evening, gentlemen,' he called. 'All right, are we?'

'Yes, all right.'

And now the policeman walked in as well. He was still young, and looked rather like the second-in-command in Jean's office. He refused to give his hat to the doorman and sat down near the entrance.

At a sign from the owner, the musicians struck up a jazz tune, while the professional dance-partner, who had been sitting at the back of the room writing a letter, approached a woman who had just arrived, to invite her to dance.

'Go now!'

Delfosse pushed something into his companion's hand and Jean hesitated to take it. The policeman was looking at them. But the action was taking place under the table.

'Now's the time.'

Chabot decided to grab the greasy banknotes, and kept them in his hand to avoid any suspicious movement. He stood up.

'I'll be back in a minute,' he said out loud.

Delfosse found it hard to conceal his relief and, in spite of himself, he threw a triumphant glance across at his pursuer.

The owner stopped Jean.

'Wait, you need the key. The attendant isn't here yet. I don't know where everyone is, they're all late today.'

The door to the cellar was open letting out a draught of cool air that made the young man shiver.

Delfosse swallowed his port in a gulp. He felt it was doing him good, so he emptied his friend's glass as well. In a few minutes, the flush of the lavatory would be washing away the compromising banknotes.

Just then, Adèle walked in, wearing a black satin coat trimmed with white fur. She greeted the musicians and shook Victor's hand.

'Fancy seeing you!' she said to Delfosse. 'Isn't your pal here? I saw him this afternoon, he came up to my place. Funny boy, isn't he! Let me just take off my coat.'

She dropped it off behind the counter and, after exchanging a few words with the boss, came to sit down by the young man.

'Two glasses, I see ... You're with someone?'

'Yes, Jean.'

'Where's he gone?'

'Just over there.'

He nodded at the washroom door.

'Oh, OK. What does his father do?'

'Accountant in an insurance firm, I think.'

She didn't reply. That was enough. She had guessed as much.

'Why don't you come by car any more?'

'It's my father's car. And I don't have a driving licence. So I can only take it out when he's away. Next week he's going to the Vosges. So if you ... if you'd like us to take a spin, just the two of us ... To Spa, for instance?'

'Who's that character over there. Could he be from the police?'

'I, er, dunno ...' he stammered, blushing.

'Don't like the look of him at all. I say, are you sure your pal hasn't passed out or something? Victor, a sherry, please. You're not dancing? Not that it bothers me, but the boss likes it to look lively.'

Chabot had been gone twenty minutes. Delfosse was such a clumsy dancer that, halfway through the number, Adèle started to take the lead.

'Do you mind? I'd better see what's the matter with him.'

He pushed open the washroom door. No sign of Jean. But the female attendant was setting out soap and towels on a cloth.

'Have you seen my friend?'

'No, I just got here.'

'Through the back door?'

'Of course, like I usually do.'

Delfosse opened it. The alleyway was empty, cold and wet, lit only by the guttering street lamp.



4. The Pipe-Smokers

There were four of them in the huge space where tables covered with blotting paper were being used as desks. The lamps had green cardboard shades. Doors stood open, leading on to empty rooms.

It was evening at police headquarters. Only the detectives were there, smoking their pipes. Tall, red-haired, Chief Inspector Delvigne was perched on the edge of a table, twisting the ends of his moustache from time to time. A young inspector was doodling on his blotter. The only person speaking was a short, stocky officer who obviously hailed from the countryside, and was still a peasant in appearance from head to toe.

‘Seven francs each, if you get packets of twelve! Pipes you’d have to pay twenty for in the shops. And nothing wrong with ’em, either! My brother-in-law, see, he works in the factory at Arlon.’

‘We could order a couple of dozen, for the whole squad.’

‘That’s what I said to my brother-in-law. And by the way, he knows what he’s talking about, he gave me a good tip to season a pipe.’

Chief Inspector Delvigne swung his leg. Everyone was following the conversation closely, pipe in hand. Under the harsh light from the lamps, blue smoke clouds rose up in the air.

‘Instead of just stuffing it in any old how, you get hold of the bowl like this ...’

The main door opened. An inspector came in, pushing someone in front of him. The chief glanced at the new arrivals and called over:

‘Is that you, Perronet?’

‘Yes sir.’

And to the pipe expert:

‘Get a move on.’

They left the young man standing by the door, and he had to listen to the entire lecture on how to season a pipe.

‘Do you want one?’ the speaker was asking Perronet. ‘These pipes are genuine briar, only seven francs, because my brother-in-law’s a foreman at Arlon.’

And Delvigne, without moving, called out:

‘Come over here, my boy.’

It was Jean Chabot, white as a sheet, his eyes staring so wildly that he looked close to nervous collapse. The others looked at him, still smoking their pipes and exchanging a few words. Some of them laughed at a joke.

‘So where did you pick him up, Perronet?’

‘In the Gai-Moulin. At the right moment. He was just going to chuck some hundred-franc notes down the WC!’

This did not surprise anyone. The chief looked around him.

‘Someone to do the forms?’

The youngest officer sat at a table, and picked up some pre-printed forms.

‘Surname, first names, age, occupation, address, previous convictions. Come on, let’s get it over with.’

‘Chabot, Jean-Joseph-Émile, sixteen, clerk, 53 Rue de la Loi.’

‘No previous?’

‘No!’

The words emerged with difficulty from his choking throat.

‘Father?’

‘Chabot, Émile, accountant.’

‘He’s got no previous either?’

‘No, never!’

‘Mother?’

‘Élisabeth Doyen, forty-two ...’

Nobody was listening to these initial formalities. The chief inspector with the ginger moustache was slowly lighting his meerschaum pipe. He stood up, took a few paces round and asked:

‘Is anyone dealing with the suicide on the Coronmeuse embankment?’

‘Gerbert.’

‘Good. Now, your turn, young man. If you want a piece of advice, don’t try to be clever. Last night, you were at the Gai-Moulin with a certain Delfosse. We’ll get to him later. The pair of you couldn’t afford even to pay for your drinks, and you already owed for several previous days. Am I right?’

Jean Chabot opened his mouth, then closed it without saying anything.

‘Your parents aren’t well-off. You don’t earn much yourself. And yet here you are, living it up like nobody’s business. You owe quite a bit of money, all told. Right?’

The young man dropped his head, but continued to feel the eyes of the five men looking at him. The inspector’s tone was condescending, and slightly mocking.

‘You were even in debt at the tobacconist’s! Because yesterday you still owed him some money. We know the score. Youngsters who want to have a high old time, but can’t pay for it. How many times have you pinched some money from your father’s wallet?’

Jean blushed deeply. The question hurt more than a blow. And worst of all, it was both fair and unfair.

Basically, everything the inspector was saying was true. But hearing the truth presented this way, in such a crude manner, without the slightest concession, made it seem almost not the truth. Chabot had started drinking halves of beer with his friends in the Pélican. He’d grown used to having a drink every night, because that was their regular meeting place, and it was warm and friendly.

They would each take it in turn to pay for a round – and a round could cost from six to ten francs.

It had been so enjoyable, that hour’s leisure. After a day at the office listening to lectures from the head clerk, to sit there in the most expensive café in town, watching people go by in Rue du Pont-d’Avroy, shaking hands with friends, seeing pretty girls who sometimes even came and sat at their table.

It was as if Liège belonged to them!

Delfosse paid for more rounds than the others, because he had more pocket money.

‘What about going to the Gai-Moulin tonight? There’s this fantastic dancer there.’

And that had been even more intoxicating. The plush seats. The warm, heady, scented atmosphere, the music, being on familiar terms with Victor, and especially with women in off-the-shoulder dresses, who pulled up their skirts to adjust a stocking.

And then, little by little, it had become a need. Just once, because he didn't want it to be always the others who paid, Jean had stolen some money, not at home, but from the petty cash at work. He had fiddled the receipts for a few parcels dispatched in the post. And it had only been twenty francs.

'I've never stolen from my father.'

'Well, it's true there can't be much to steal. Right, let's get back to last night. You were both in the Gai-Moulin. Without a *sou* between you. And you bought a drink for the dancer. Pass me your cigarettes.'

The young man handed over the packet, without understanding.

'Filter-tipped Luxors. Same, are they, Dubois?'

'Yes sir, that's right'.

'So, into the club that night, walks a man who looks well-off, he's drinking champagne, and you can bet he's got plenty of money in his wallet. Contrary to your usual habits, you both go out the back way. And on the cellar stairs, what do we find today near the back door, but two cigarette ends and traces of footprints? Suggesting that instead of going out, what you really did was hide back there. And the foreigner was killed. In the Gai-Moulin, or somewhere else. His wallet was missing. And indeed, so was his gold cigarette-case. Then today, what happens? You pay off your debts! And this evening, realizing that you're being followed, you try to throw the money down the pan!'

All this was said in a neutral tone of voice, as if the inspector was scarcely taking the matter seriously.

'And that, young man, is how you end up in trouble. Now just get it off your chest. That's the best thing you can do. We could perhaps take into account—'

The telephone rang. Everyone stopped talking, except the officer who picked it up.

'Hello. Yes ... Good. Tell him the van will be along soon.'

Then to the others, after hanging up:

'It was for that housemaid who killed herself. Her employers want the body picked up as soon as possible.'

Chabot was staring at the filthy ceiling. He was clenching his teeth so tightly that it would have been difficult to prise them apart with a knife.

'So where did you attack Graphopoulos? In the nightclub? On the way out?'

'No, it's not true,' Jean cried hoarsely. 'I swear on my father's life—'

'Leave your father out of it. He's already got enough to worry about.'

And these words started Jean trembling convulsively. He looked around in panic. He was only now grasping the situation. He knew that in an hour or so his parents would be told.

'I won't! It's not true! I won't ...!' he cried.

'Calm down, young man!'

'I won't, I won't!'

And he flung himself at the officer standing between him and the door. The struggle was short-lived. The young man did not know himself what he wanted. He was beside himself, shouting, hiccupping. And in the end, he rolled on the floor, groaning and twisting his arms.

The other men watched him, smoking and exchanging glances.

'A glass of water, Dubois. And I could do with some tobacco.'

The glass of water was thrown into Chabot's face. His attack of nerves resolved itself into furious sobbing. He tried to push his fingers down his throat.

'I don't want to, I don't ...'

The chief inspector shrugged and muttered:

'They're all the same, these damn kids. And we'll have his father and mother turning up any minute.'

The atmosphere was, if anything, like that in a hospital, when doctors stand around the bed observing a patient fighting for his life.

Five of them were looking down at this youth – just a boy, really. Five men in the prime of life, who'd seen it all before and weren't going to be impressed.

'Come on, up you get!' said the chief, impatiently.

And obeying meekly, Chabot got to his feet. His resistance was broken. His nerves had been shattered. He looked around in panic, like an animal giving up the fight.

'I beg you—'

'Tell us where the money came from.'

'I don't know, I swear—'

‘No need to be swearing things all the time.’

His dark suit was covered in dust. Wiping his face with his dirty hands, Chabot left grey marks on his cheeks.

‘My father’s a sick man. He has heart trouble. He had a bad turn last year, and the doctor told him he must avoid distressing himself—’

He was speaking in a dull voice. He had no strength left.

‘Well, you shouldn’t have got into trouble, then, kid. And now, it would be better just to tell us everything. Who hit the man? You? Delfosse? That’s another boy on the way to perdition. And if there’s anyone we ought to be bringing in, it’s probably him.’

A new policeman entered the room, greeted the others cheerfully, and sat down at a table, where he picked up a file.

‘I didn’t kill anyone! I didn’t even know—’

‘Look, I’m prepared to believe you didn’t actually *kill* him.’

As if speaking to a child, the chief inspector was assuming a more paternal air.

‘But you certainly know something. That money didn’t jump into your pocket. Yesterday you didn’t have any, and today you do. Give him a chair, someone.’

Because Chabot was swaying on his feet. His legs were failing to hold him up. He sat down on a straw-bottomed chair and put his head in his hands.

‘Take your time, no need to rush at it. Tell yourself this is your best chance of getting out of this mess. Anyway, you’re under seventeen, so you’ll go before the juvenile court. And the worst you could get is a young offenders’ institution.’

An idea struck Chabot, and he looked around a little less anxiously. He stared at his inquisitors in turn. None of them resembled the man with broad shoulders.

Had he been mistaken about the stranger? Was he really a policeman? Or could it even be that he was the murderer? He’d been at the Gai-Moulin the previous evening. He had still been there when he and René had left the main room.

And if he had followed them, could that be because he was trying to have them arrested in his place?

‘I think I understand,’ he cried, panting with eagerness. ‘Yes, I think I do know who the murderer was. A big man, very tall, clean-shaven.’

The chief inspector shrugged his shoulders. But Chabot didn’t give up.

'He came into the Gai-Moulin just after the Turk. He was alone. And I saw him again today, he followed me. He went to the greengrocer's and asked her about me.'

'What's he talking about?'

Inspector Perronet muttered:

'Not sure. But yes, last night at the Gai-Moulin, there was a customer that nobody seemed to know.'

'And when did he leave?'

'Same time as the dancer.'

Delvigne looked hard at Chabot, whose hopes were rising, then took no more notice of him. He spoke to his colleagues.

'Tell me, in what order exactly did people leave the club?'

'The two boys left first. Well, they didn't really leave, because we've established that they hid on the cellar steps. Then the gigolo and the musicians. The place was closing. The man in question, the big fellow, went out with the girl Adèle. She works as a dancer.'

'So just the boss, Graphopoulos and the two waiters were left.'

'Ah no, one of the waiters, Joseph his name is, left with the musicians.'

'So, the boss, one waiter, the Greek—'

'And the two boys on the stairs.'

'And what does the owner say?'

'He says his rich customer left and that he and Victor, the other waiter, turned off the lights and locked up.'

'And nobody saw this other man Chabot is talking about, after that?'

'No. But I was told, yes, that he was a big man, broad-shouldered. A Frenchman, because he didn't speak like a local.'

The chief yawned, and looked impatient as he packed his pipe again.

'Well, phone the Gai-Moulin and ask Girard what's going on there now.'

Chabot waited anxiously. This was even worse than before, because now there was a glimmer of hope. But he was afraid he might be wrong. Fear racked him with pain. He gripped the edge of the table and looked round from one officer to another, his eyes drawn repeatedly to the telephone.

'Hello, get me the Gai-Moulin, please, mademoiselle.'

Meanwhile, the pipe enthusiast was asking the others:

'Is that settled, then? I'll write to my brother-in-law? And what kind do you prefer, straight or curved?'

'Straight!' said the chief.

'OK, two dozen straight pipes. Now, do you need me any more? It's just that one of my kids has the measles.'

'Yes, you can go home.'

Before he left, the officer looked across at Jean Chabot and whispered to his boss:

'Are we hanging on to him?'

And the young man, who had overheard this, strained his ears to catch the reply.

'Don't know yet. Till tomorrow anyway. The prosecutor's office will have to make a decision.'

All was lost. Jean slumped in his seat. If they didn't let him go until tomorrow, it would be too late. His parents would know! At this very moment, they must be waiting for him to get home, and worrying.

But he had no tears left. His whole being was in a state of collapse. He could vaguely hear the telephone conversation.

'Girard, that you? ... So what's he doing there? ... What? ... Dead drunk? ... Yes, he's still here ... No ... He denies it, obviously ... Wait, I'll ask the boss.'

And to the chief inspector:

'Girard's asking what he should do. The other young man is completely drunk. He's ordered champagne and he's sharing it with the dancer, who's not much better. Should we arrest him?'

His boss looked at Jean and sighed.

'No, we've already got one of them. Leave him alone for now. He might do something silly that'll help us. But tell Girard to stick with him. He can phone us later.'

Chief Inspector Delvigne had settled down in the only armchair in the room, and shut his eyes. He appeared to be sleeping, but the thin stream of smoke rising from his pipe indicated that he was not.

One inspector was putting the finishing touches to the transcript of Jean's interrogation. Another was pacing around, waiting impatiently for it to be three o'clock so that he could go home. The room had cooled down. Even the pipe smoke seemed cold. The young man could not sleep. His thoughts were in turmoil. Leaning his elbows on the table, he closed his eyes, opened them, closed them again. Every time his eyelids parted, he saw in front of him the same headed paper on which a fine copperplate hand had written:

Record of the charges put to Joseph Dumourois, day-labourer, domiciled at Flémalle-Haute, regarding the theft of rabbits, the property of ...

The rest was hidden under a blotter.

The telephone rang. The inspector who had been walking about about picked it up.

'Yes ... Good ... Right. I'll tell him ... Lucky for some, eh?'

He went over to the boss.

'Girard on the line. Delfosse and the dancer took a taxi back to her room, Rue de la Régence. They went in together. Girard's on duty outside.'

In the strange crimson mist inside his brain, Jean pictured Adèle's bedroom, the unmade bed he had seen earlier that day, the dancer undressing and lighting the spirit stove.

'Still nothing to tell us?' asked the boss, without leaving his armchair. Jean did not reply. He had no strength left. Indeed he hardly understood that he was the one being addressed.

Delvigne sighed and told his inspector.

'You can go home. But just leave me some tobacco, will you.'

'Do you think you're going to get anywhere?' The inspector nodded towards the dark silhouette of Jean, bent double with his head on the table. Another shrug.

And now there was a blank in Chabot's memory. A black hole, filled with dark shapes writhing and red sparks flashing through the obscurity without lighting it up. He sat up with a start, hearing a persistent ringing. He saw three large pale windows, the yellow lamps, the chief inspector rubbing his eyes, and automatically reaching for his cold pipe on the table, as he walked stiff-legged over to the phone.

'Hello, yes! Hello! Yes, this is headquarters. No, not at all. He's right here. What? Oh, all right, he can come and see him if that's what he wants.'

The chief inspector, dry-mouthing, lit his pipe, drew a few bitter puffs on it and came to stand in front of Chabot.

'That's your father, who's reported you missing to the 6th district police station. I think he's coming over here.'

The sun's rays suddenly emerged from behind a nearby roof and lit up the windows, as the cleaners began to arrive with buckets and brushes.

A distant hubbub came from the market a couple of hundred metres away, opposite the town hall. The first trams were running, sounding their bells as if their mission was to wake everyone up.

Jean Chabot, looking desperate, ran his hand through his hair.



5. The Confrontation

Delfosse's hoarse breaths stopped abruptly as he opened his eyes and sat up with a start, looking round in fright.

The bedroom curtains had not been drawn and the electric light bulb was still on, its yellow glow fading into the bright sunlight. The busy sounds of city traffic rose from the street.

From closer at hand, came regular breathing. It was Adèle, only half-dressed, lying face down, her head buried in the pillow. Her body gave off a damp warmth. One foot was still in its shoe, the stiletto heel snagged on the gold silk eiderdown.

René Delfosse felt ill. His tie was throttling him. He stood up, looking round for some water and found a carafe, but no glass. He drank the lukewarm liquid straight from the bottleneck, greedily, while contemplating his reflection in the washstand mirror.

His brain was functioning slowly. His memory was returning gradually, with gaps. For instance, he couldn't remember how he had ended up in this room. He glanced at his watch. It had stopped, but the street sounds outside suggested that it must be at least nine in the morning. The bank across the road was open.

'Adèle!' he called, so as not to feel alone any more.

She stirred, turned over and curled up, without waking.

He stared at her without feeling any desire. Perhaps at that moment, the woman's pale flesh even revolted him.

She opened one eye, twitched her shoulders and went back to sleep. As he regained his wits, Delfosse became more agitated. His anxious gaze darted round

the room, without resting anywhere. He went over to the window and recognized the police inspector, who was pacing up and down on the pavement opposite without taking his eyes off the door downstairs.

‘Adèle, wake up! For the love of God!’

Now he was scared! Terrified! He picked up his jacket from the floor and felt automatically in the pockets. Not a centime left.

He drank some more water: it tasted of nothing but lay heavy on his disturbed stomach. For a moment, he thought he was going to vomit, which would have been a relief, but couldn’t manage it.

The dancer had gone back to sleep, her hair tangled, her face gleaming with perspiration. A deep sleep, into which she seemed to have plunged deliberately.

Delfosse put on his shoes and noticed the woman’s handbag on the table. An idea struck him. He checked that the policeman was still outside. Then he waited for Adèle’s breathing to become quite regular again.

He opened the bag quietly. In a jumble of rouge, lipstick, powder and old letters, he found about nine hundred francs, which he pocketed.

She hadn’t moved. He tiptoed to the door, and went downstairs, but instead of going out into the street, he headed into the courtyard. This was the back entrance to the grocery store, piled high with barrels and boxes. A wide doorway for vehicles led on to a different street, lined with parked trucks.

Delfosse had to force himself not to break into a run. And half an hour later, damp with sweat, he arrived at the Guillemins railway station.

Inspector Girard shook hands with the colleague who had approached.

‘What’s going on?’

‘The chief wants you to bring in the young man and the dancer. Here are the warrants.’

‘Has the other kid confessed?’

‘He keeps denying everything. Or rather he’s telling some cock-and-bull story about money stolen from a chocolate shop. His father’s turned up. Sad, really.’

‘Are you coming up with me?’

‘Chief didn’t say. Might as well, though.’

The two men entered the building and knocked on the bedroom door. No reply. Inspector Girard turned the handle and opened it. As if sensing danger,

Adèle woke up with a jump, leaned up on her elbow and asked in a thick voice:
‘What’s the matter?’

‘Police! I’ve got arrest warrants here for the pair of you! Damn it all, where’s the boy gone?’

Adèle too looked round for René, swinging her legs down from the bed. A sort of instinct propelled her towards her handbag, gaping open on the table: she fell on it, groped anxiously inside and shrieked:

‘The little bastard! He’s taken my money!’

‘And you didn’t know he’d gone?’

‘I was asleep. Oh, he’ll pay for this! That’s those stinking rich kids for you!’

Girard had spotted a gold cigarette-case on the bedside table.

‘Whose is that?’

‘He must have left it here. He was holding it last night.’

‘Get dressed!’

‘Are you arresting me?’

‘I’ve got a warrant here made out in the name of a certain Adèle Bosquet, occupation dancer. I presume that’s you.’

‘All right, all right!’

She didn’t panic. She seemed to be more distressed at being the victim of theft than by the prospect of arrest. While combing her hair, she repeated several times:

‘The little bastard! And there was I, fast asleep!’

The two policemen looked knowingly round the room, exchanging glances: they’d seen it all before.

‘Will this take long, do you think?’ she asked them. ‘Because if so, I’ll bring a change of clothes.’

‘Don’t know. We were just told ...’

She shrugged her shoulders and sighed:

‘Well, since I haven’t done anything wrong ...’

And, as she headed for the door:

‘OK, I’m ready. You’ve got a car, at least? No? Then I’d prefer to walk ahead on my own, you can follow behind me.’

And she angrily snapped her handbag shut and picked it up, while the inspector slipped the cigarette-case into his pocket.

Once outside, Adèle made straight for police headquarters, and marched in confidently, stopping only once she was in the wide corridor.

‘Over here!’ said Girard. ‘Just a minute. I’m going to ask the chief—’

But she had dodged him and walked straight in. She grasped the situation at a glance. They were waiting for her, it seemed, because nothing was happening. The chief inspector with the ginger moustache was pacing round the large room.

Jean Chabot, leaning on a table, was trying to eat a sandwich they had brought him. His father was standing in a corner, his head bowed.

‘What about the other boy?’ asked the chief, as he saw Adèle accompanied only by Girard.

‘Lost him! He must have slipped out by a back door. According to mademoiselle here, he pinched the contents of her purse.’

Chabot dared not look at anyone. He put down the sandwich, which he had hardly touched.

‘A proper pair of rascals, inspector! Catch me being nice to the likes of them again!’

‘Calm down, can’t you! Just answer my questions please.’

‘But he’s walked off with my savings!’

‘I asked you to be quiet, mademoiselle.’

Girard whispered to his boss, and passed him the gold cigarette-case.

‘And for a start, tell me how this object came to be in your bedroom. I presume you recognize it. You were with the man Graphopoulos on his last evening alive. He brought this cigarette-case out several times, as various witnesses have told us. Did he give it to you?’

She looked at Chabot, then at the chief inspector. ‘No!’

‘So how did it get into your room?’

‘Delfosse—’

Chabot looked up sharply and made as if to rush forward.

‘That’s not true. She—’

‘You, sit down! So mademoiselle, you claim that René Delfosse was in possession of this object. You realize the gravity of that accusation.’

She laughed:

‘You bet I do! He ran off with the money in my handbag, that—’

‘Have you known him long?’

‘About three months. Since he started coming every night to the Gai-Moulin, with that other so-and-so! Pair of crybabies they are, anyway! I should have been more suspicious. But you know how it is. They’re so young! It was relaxing to chat with them. I treated them as pals, see? And when they bought me a drink, I took care not to order anything too expensive.’

Her expression was stony.

‘Were you the mistress of these two youths?’

She gave a short laugh.

‘Hardly! Yeah, that’s probably what they wanted. Too shy to ask, though. They used to come up to my place, one at a time, on silly excuses, just to watch me getting dressed.’

‘On the night of the murder, you were drinking champagne with Graphopoulos. Did you have an arrangement to follow him out at the end of the evening?’

‘What do you take me for? I’m a dancer.’

‘Well, more precisely, you’re a hostess. And we all know what that means. So did you leave with him?’

‘No, I did not!’

‘Did he proposition you?’

‘Oh! Yes and no. He was on at me to go and see him at his hotel, can’t remember which one. I didn’t pay attention.’

‘But you didn’t leave the Gai-Moulin on your own.’

‘No, that’s right. Just when I was on my way out, this other customer – I don’t know him, he must be French – anyway he asked me the way to Place Saint-Lambert. I said I was going that way, and he walked along with me for a bit, then he suddenly said, “Oh, I left my tobacco in the bar,” and he turned back.’

‘Was this man heavily built?’

‘Yeah, that’s right.’

‘So you went straight home?’

‘Like I do every night.’

‘And you learned about the crime next day from the papers?’

‘That young man there was at my place. It was him that told me.’

Twice or three times already, Chabot had tried to interrupt, but the chief inspector had quelled him with a glance. As for the boy’s father, he had remained

rooted to the spot.

'And you have no idea who could have committed the murder?'

She didn't reply at once.

'Answer the question, please! Chabot has already admitted that he and his friend were hiding on the cellar steps at the Gai-Moulin.'

She laughed at that.

'He claims that all they wanted to do was steal from the till. When they went back inside, a quarter of an hour after closing time, they apparently saw Graphopoulos lying dead on the floor.'

'No kidding?'

'So who, in your view, could have committed the crime? Wait. We have only a small number of possible suspects. Génaro, the club owner. He claims he went out soon after you, with Victor. And he says Graphopoulos had already left the club by then.'

She shrugged, while Chabot looked at her both angrily and imploringly.

'You don't think either Génaro or Victor was responsible?'

'That's ridiculous,' she said, indifferently.

'Then there's this unknown customer. You said he came out at the same time as you. He might have returned to the club, either alone or with you.'

'But how would he have got back in?'

'You've been working there long enough to have got yourself a secret key, haven't you?'

Another shrug.

'Well, anyway, it was Delfosse who had the cigarette-case,' she said. 'And he was hiding.'

'That's not true! I saw the cigarette-case in your room at midday!' Chabot burst out. 'I saw it. I swear.'

She repeated:

'No! It was Delfosse that had it.'

A shouting match broke out between the two of them, but was interrupted when a detective walked in. He whispered something to the chief inspector.

'Bring him in.'

There now entered a respectable-looking man of about fifty, with an impressive stomach, across which a gold watch chain was stretched. He felt it

incumbent on him to adopt a dignified, indeed solemn expression.

'I was asked to come to see you,' he said, looking round in surprise.

'Ah, Monsieur Lasnier,' said the chief inspector. 'Take a seat, please. Forgive me for troubling you, but I would like to know whether in the course of yesterday, you missed any money from your till.'

The owner of the chocolate shop in Rue Léopold, round-eyed with astonishment, repeated:

'My till?'

And Monsieur Chabot, Jean's father, gazed at him in anguish, as if on his answer depended what he himself would think of the affair.

'I imagine that, for instance, if someone had taken two thousand francs, that would have been noticed?'

'Two thousand francs? I really don't see—'

'Never mind. Just answer my question. Did you notice any money missing from the shop's takings?'

'No, none at all.'

'Your nephew did come to see you, didn't he?'

'Wait a minute. Yes, I think he did drop in, as he does from time to time. Not to see me, more to get some chocolate.'

'And you never noticed that he was stealing from the till?'

'Monsieur!'

The chocolatier swelled with anger and seemed to call on them to witness the insult to his family.

'My brother-in-law can well afford to give his son all the money he needs.'

'My apologies, Monsieur Lasnier. And thank you.'

'Was that all you wanted me for?'

'Yes, that's all, thank you.'

'But what makes you think that—'

'I can't reveal that at the moment. Girard! Please see Monsieur Lasnier out.'

And the chief began to pace the room again, as Adèle asked, brazenly:

'Do you need me any more?'

He glared at her with an expression which was enough to silence her. And for the next ten minutes, nobody said a word. They must have been waiting for someone or something. Monsieur Chabot did not dare smoke. Nor did he dare

look at his son. He was as ill at ease as a poor patient in an eminent doctor's waiting room. Jean followed the chief inspector with his eyes and every time he came near, seemed to want to say something.

At last, steps were heard in the corridor. A knock at the door.

'Come in!'

Two men entered the room: Génaro, short and stocky, in a light-coloured Norfolk jacket, and Victor the waiter, whom Chabot had never seen in street clothes, and who now, dressed in black, might have been taken for a cleric.

'So, monsieur,' the Italian began volubly, 'I received your summons just an hour ago, and—'

'Yes, yes. Now can you just tell me whether last night you saw Graphopoulos's cigarette-case in the hands of René Delfosse?'

Génaro made a gesture of apology.

'Personally, you know, I don't pay much attention to the customers, but Victor will be able to tell you—'

'All right. You, then, can you answer the question?'

Jean Chabot stared the waiter in the eye, breathing heavily. But Victor looked down slyly and murmured:

'I wouldn't want to say anything against the young men who have always been very nice to me, but I suppose I must tell you the truth.'

'I want a yes or a no!'

'Well ... yes, he did have it. I almost warned him to be prudent—'

'I don't believe it!' Jean burst out. 'Victor, how can you say that? Please listen, monsieur—'

'Be quiet! Now tell me what you think about the financial position of the two young men.'

And Victor, sighing awkwardly, and speaking as if with reluctance, said:

'Well, of course they always owed me a bit of money. And not just for drinks. They sometimes borrowed a little cash from me.'

'And what was your impression of Graphopoulos?'

'A rich foreigner, passing through. They're our best customers. He ordered champagne straight away, didn't ask the price. He gave me a tip of fifty francs.'

'And did you see any thousand-franc notes in his wallet?'

'Oh yes, he was loaded. Mainly French francs, not Belgian ones.'

‘And that’s all you noticed?’

‘He had a very fine pearl in his tie-pin.’

‘And when did he leave?’

‘A little after Adèle, who went out with another customer. A big man, who just drank beer and gave me twenty *sous* as a tip. A Frenchman. He was smoking dark tobacco.’

‘So you were left alone with the boss?’

‘Yes, just long enough to turn out the lights and lock up.’

‘And you went straight home?’

‘Yes, as usual. Monsieur Génaro left me at the bottom of Rue Haute-Sauvenière, where he lives.’

‘Next morning, when you arrived back at work, did you notice anything out of place in the room?’

‘No, nothing. No blood or anything. The cleaners were in and I was supervising them.’

Génaro was listening unconcernedly.

The inspector spoke to him:

‘Is it true that you usually leave the night’s takings in the till?’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Never mind! Answer my question.’

‘No, I certainly don’t, I take it all home, except for the small change.’

‘And how much would that be?’

‘About fifty francs on average, just coins that I leave in the drawer.’

‘But that’s not true!’ shouted Jean Chabot. ‘I’ve seen him go out, oh, ten times, or twenty times, and leaving—’

And Génaro asked:

‘What’s going on? Is he saying that ...’

He looked genuinely amazed as he turned to the dancer.

‘Adèle will tell you—’

‘Yes, of course!’

‘What I don’t understand, Chief Inspector, is how the young men can claim they saw the corpse inside the club. Because Graphopoulos left before I did. He couldn’t have got back in. The crime must have been committed outside, I have no idea where. I am sorry to be so definite about that. They are my customers,

after all. And I myself felt quite kindly disposed towards them. If you want proof of that, I allowed them credit. But the truth is the truth, and this is a serious enough case for—'

'That will do, thank you.'

There was a moment's hesitation. Then Génaro asked:

'Can I go now?'

'Yes, you and the waiter. If I need you again, I'll let you know.'

'I presume there is no objection to the club staying open?'

'No, none at all.'

And now Adèle asked:

'Me too?'

'Yes, go on home!'

'I'm free to go, then?'

The chief inspector did not reply. He looked troubled, as he steadily stroked the bowl of his pipe. When the three people from the club had left, the room felt empty. Just the chief inspector, Chabot and his father were there, none of them speaking.

Monsieur Chabot was the first to say something. He hesitated for a while, then at last coughed and said:

'Excuse me. But do you really believe ...?'

'What?' the other man asked, irritably.

'I don't know. It seemed to me ...'

And he made a vague gesture indicating puzzlement. A gesture that signified: 'It looks to me as if something fishy is going on. Something's not quite right.'

Jean stood up, apparently having mustered a little more strength. He dared to look at his father.

'They're all lying!' he said clearly. 'I swear they are. Do you believe me, Chief Inspector?'

No answer.

'Do you believe me, Father?'

Monsieur Chabot at first looked aside. Then he stammered:

'I—I don't know.'

And finally, as if common sense had come to his rescue:

'We should surely try to find this Frenchman everyone is talking about, shouldn't we?'

The chief inspector seemed undecided, since he was walking round with a stormy expression.

'Well, at any rate, Delfosse has vanished,' he muttered, more for himself than for the others.

He paced about some more, and after a while spoke again:

'And two witnesses have said he was in possession of that cigarette-case!'

He went up and down the room again, pursuing his thought:

'And you were both on the cellar steps ... And then this evening, you were trying to get rid of those banknotes down the lavatory! And—'

Here he stopped and looked at each of them in turn.

'And now the chocolate-shop owner says he hasn't had any money stolen!'

He went out, leaving them together. But they failed to take advantage of it. When he returned, father and son were still in their original places, five metres from one another, each plunged into a determined silence.

'Well, too bad. I've just phoned the examining magistrate. He'll be in charge from now on. And he won't hear of letting you out on bail. It's De Conninck. If you want to take it up with him, you can always ask.'

'François de Conninck?'

'Yes, I think that's his name.'

And Jean's father muttered shamefacedly:

'We were at school together.'

'All right, go and see him if you think it will be any help. I doubt it, though, because I know him. For the moment, he's directed me to have your son taken to Saint-Léonard.'

These words had a sinister ring. Until now, nothing had sounded final.

Saint-Léonard! The city jail! That terrifying black building towering ominously over a whole district by the Pont-Maguin, with its medieval turrets, its loophole windows and its iron bars.

Jean paled, and said nothing.

'Girard!' the chief called, opening the door. 'Two men and a car, now.'

That was enough. They waited.

'It won't hurt if you try and see Monsieur de Conninck,' the chief sighed, for the sake of saying something. 'If you were at school together ...'

But his face was a better guide to his thoughts. He was thinking of the distance that separated the senior magistrate, born into a family of lawyers and related to the most important people in town, from an accountant whose son had actually *admitted* that he had intended to steal from the till of a nightclub.

'Ready, sir,' said Girard. 'Should we ...?'

Something glinted in his hands. The chief shrugged an affirmative.

And it was a ritual gesture, accomplished so fast that the father only realized what was happening when it was over. Girard had taken hold of Jean's hands. A metallic click.

'This way.'

Handcuffs! And two uniformed policemen waiting outside by the car!

Jean took a few steps. It seemed he had nothing to say. But at the door, he turned round. His voice was hardly recognizable.

'Father, I swear—'

'Well now, about those pipes! I thought if we ordered, say, *three* dozen ...'

It was the pipe-obsessed inspector who had walked in, blind to the scene around him. As he suddenly caught sight of the young man from behind, and glimpsed the handcuffs on his wrists, he stopped short:

'Oh, so it's in the bag, is it?'

The gesture indicated: 'Got him, eh!'

The chief inspector pointed to Monsieur Chabot who had collapsed into a chair, head in hands, and was sobbing like a woman.

The other man went on in a lower voice:

'We can always find someone from one of the other divisions to take the third dozen. When you think of the price!'

A car door slammed. An engine started.

The chief inspector, looking awkward, was saying to Monsieur Chabot:

'You know ... nothing's definite yet ...'

And without conviction:

'... especially if you know Monsieur de Conninck.'

And the father, as he beat a retreat, gave a pale smile of thanks.



6. The Fugitive

At one o'clock, the local newspapers were published, and all of them had banner headlines on their front pages. The conservative *Gazette de Liège* proclaimed:

*Corpse in laundry basket case!
Crime committed by two young hoodlums!*

The headline in the leftwing *Wallonie socialiste* was:

Crime committed by rich young brats!

The papers all reported Jean Chabot's arrest and René Delfosse's disappearance. The Chabot house in Rue de la Loi had already been photographed. One report read:

Immediately after an emotional meeting with his son at police headquarters, Monsieur Chabot went home and has refused to make a statement. Madame Chabot is devastated and has taken to her bed.

We approached Monsieur Delfosse as he was returning from Huy, where he owns several factories. René Delfosse's father, an active man in his fifties, showed no emotion on hearing the shocking news. He refuses to believe that his son is guilty, and states that he will personally look into it.

In his prison cell at Saint-Léonard, Jean Chabot is reported to remain unmoved. He will see his lawyer before he appears before Examining Magistrate De Conninck, who is in charge of the case.

In Rue de la Loi, everything was as calm as usual. Children were filing into the schoolyard to play while they waited for the bell. There was grass growing

between the cobbles and a woman was scrubbing the steps of number 48. The only other sound was that of a coppersmith hammering on an anvil.

But doors were opening more than usual. A head would poke out, looking towards number 53. A few words would be exchanged from the threshold:

‘Can you believe it? He’s just a kid. When I think that not so long ago he was playing in the street with my children!’

‘Well, I said to my husband, when I saw him coming home the worse for drink a couple of times ... At his age!’

About every quarter of an hour, the doorbell would ring at the Chabot house. The Polish student would open the door.

‘No, Monsieur and Madame Chabot are not at home,’ she would announce with her strong foreign accent.

‘I’m from the *Gazette*. Would you tell them—’

And the reporter would crane his neck to try to see inside. He could vaguely glimpse the kitchen, and the shape of a man seated there.

‘No, don’t trouble yourself. They are not here.’

‘But—’

She was already shutting the door. The reporter had to be content with questioning the neighbours.

One of the papers had a sub-heading a little different from the others:

Where is the man with broad shoulders?

Followed by a report:

Everyone seems to believe that Chabot and Delfosse are guilty. Without wishing to defend them, but respecting the objective facts of the case, we are inclined to express some surprise at the disappearance of an important witness: the broad-shouldered customer who was seen at the Gai-Moulin club on the night of the crime.

According to the waiter, the stranger was French: he was seen for the first and last time that evening. Has he already left town? Did he wish to escape being questioned by the police?

This lead may be a possible line of inquiry, and if by any chance the youngsters are not guilty, some light might be shed on the matter from this direction.

We also believe that Chief Inspector Delvigne, who is leading operations jointly with the examining magistrate, has asked the regular patrols to make inquiries in order to trace this mysterious customer at the Gai-Moulin.

The paper had come out shortly before two o'clock. At three, a portly man with ruddy cheeks turned up at police headquarters asking for Chief Inspector Delvigne, and declaring:

'I am the manager of the Hôtel Moderne, Rue du Pont-d'Avroy. I've just seen the paper, and I think I can tell you something about the man you're looking for.'

'The Frenchman?'

'Yes! And about the murder victim! I don't usually pay much attention to the papers, so that's why it's taken me so long. Let's see, what day is it today, Friday? So it must have been Wednesday. The murder happened on Wednesday, is that right? I wasn't here, I'd gone to Brussels on business. Anyway, it seems a customer checked in, with a foreign accent, and very little luggage, just a small pigskin case. He asked for a large room looking on to the street and he went straight upstairs. Then a few minutes later, another customer took the room next door. Normally, we get people to fill in their police forms immediately. I don't know why this didn't happen. I got back at midnight. I looked at the row of keys and asked the receptionist if she had the forms for the new arrivals.

'And she said, "Yes, all but two people who went straight out." On Thursday morning, that's yesterday, only one of them was back. I didn't worry much about the other. I thought perhaps he'd had an assignation somewhere in town. During the day, I didn't see the one who had come back, and this morning I was told he'd paid his bill and left. The desk clerk asked him to fill out his police form, but apparently he just shrugged his shoulders and said it wasn't worth bothering about now.'

'Wait a minute,' the chief inspector interrupted. 'Is this the person who corresponds to the description of the broad-shouldered Frenchman?'

'Yes. He left, taking his suitcase, at about nine a.m.'

'And the other one?'

'Since he still hadn't returned, I used the pass-key to go into his room, which is what we have to do in an emergency. And on the pigskin case, I saw the name Ephraim Graphopoulos. And that's when I realized that the man in the laundry basket must be our customer.'

'So if I understand this correctly,' said the chief inspector, 'both these men arrived on Wednesday afternoon, a few hours before the crime, one after the other? As if they were on the same train perhaps?'

‘Yes, the fast train from Paris.’

‘And they went out that evening, also one after another.’

‘Without filling in their forms.’

‘And only the Frenchman came back, and now this morning he’s disappeared again.’

‘That’s right. I would be grateful if you could avoid mentioning the name of the hotel, it might put people off.’

But at that very moment, one of the waiters from the Hôtel Moderne was telling exactly the same story to a journalist.

And by five o’clock the evening editions of the papers were reporting:

Inquiry takes a new turn. Was the man with broad shoulders the murderer?

The weather was fine. In the sunny streets, life was carrying on as usual. The local police were trying to spot the wanted Frenchman among the passing crowds. At the railway station, an inspector was standing behind each ticket clerk and all travellers were being examined carefully.

In Rue du Pot-d’Or, outside the Gai-Moulin, cases of champagne were being unloaded from a truck: delivery men were taking them into the cellar, crossing the dark, cool club interior. Génaro, in shirt-sleeves, a cigarette in his mouth, was supervising them. He shrugged as he watched passers-by stop outside and whisper to each other with a little shudder:

‘It was there!’

They tried to peep inside, squinting into the shadows, where all that could be seen were the velvet seats and marble-topped tables.

At nine in the evening, the lamps were lit and the musicians started tuning up.

At a quarter past nine, six journalists were standing at the bar, holding animated discussions.

By half past nine, the room was over half full, something that hardly ever happened from one year’s end to the next. Not only were there the usual young gadabouts who haunted the town’s nightclubs and dance halls, but also respectable citizens, setting foot for the first time in this place of doubtful repute.

They were there to see. No one was dancing. The incomers stared in turn at the owner, at Victor, and at the professional dance-partner. People invariably headed for the washroom, so as to view for themselves the famous cellar steps.

'Quick, get a move on!' Génaro was urging the two waiters, who had their work cut out. And he gestured at the band. Under his breath, he asked a woman of his acquaintance:

'You haven't seen Adèle, have you? She ought to be here.'

Because Adèle was the big attraction. The sightseers wanted most of all to be able to take a closer look at her.

'Watch out,' whispered a journalist to his colleague. 'There they are.'

And he pointed to two men who were sitting at a table near the velvet curtain over the door. Chief Inspector Delvigne was drinking beer, and the froth was clinging to his ginger moustache. Next to him, Inspector Girard was observing the customers.

By ten o'clock, the atmosphere was electric. This wasn't the usual Gai-Moulin, frequented by its few regulars and the occasional tourist looking for a girl to spend the evening with. Because of the presence of the newspapermen above all, the gathering felt like a cross between a criminal trial and a gala evening. All the same people were there. Not just the reporters, but the columnists. One newspaper editor had come in person. And the kind of customers who frequented the expensive cafés, *bons viveurs* as they used to call them, were also there, accompanied by glamorous women.

About twenty cars were parked in the street outside. People greeted each other from table to table. Men stood up to shake hands.

'Do you think anything's going to happen?'

'Hush, not so loud. See that man over there, with red hair, that's Chief Inspector Delvigne. If he's turned up, it must mean—'

'Which one's Adèle? That big blonde?'

'No, she isn't here yet.'

But she was on her way. Adèle made a sensational entrance. She was wearing a voluminous black satin evening coat, lined with white silk. She took a few steps into the room, stopped, looked round, then nonchalantly sauntered over to the band and shook the leader's hand.

Flashbulbs. A photographer had just taken a snap for his paper, and the young woman shrugged, as if she were indifferent to this celebrity.

'Port, five glasses, waiter!'

Victor and Joseph were rushed off their feet. They threaded their way between the tables. It was like a celebration or a party, but one where people were there essentially to watch everyone else. Few dancers had ventured out on to the dance-floor.

‘It’s not all that exciting,’ a woman was saying to her husband, who had brought her to a nightclub for the first time in her life. ‘I don’t see anything disreputable going on.’

Génaro went over to the policemen.

‘Excuse me, messieurs. May I ask your advice? Should we go ahead with the usual cabaret? Normally, at this point, Adèle would be dancing.’

But the chief shrugged, looking elsewhere.

‘It’s just I didn’t want to do anything you wouldn’t want us to—’

The young woman was at the bar, surrounded by journalists who were plying her with questions.

‘So this Delfosse, he took money from your handbag? Was he your lover?’

‘No, he wasn’t even my lover!’

She was looking a little awkward now. She needed to make an effort to face all the eyes fixed on her.

‘You were drinking champagne with Graphopoulos. So what was he like?’

‘A real gentleman. Please, leave me alone.’

She went to the cloakroom to take off her coat, then approached Génaro:

‘Should I be dancing?’

He didn’t know. He was looking at the crowd rather anxiously, as if he feared being overwhelmed.

‘I wonder what they’re waiting for.’

She lit a cigarette, leaned against the bar with a distant expression and stopped answering the questions the reporters continued to ask her.

One plump matron said out loud:

‘How ridiculous to charge ten francs for lemonade! There isn’t even anything to see!’

But there *was* something to see, though only for those who knew the people involved in the drama. The doorman in his maroon uniform pulled aside the curtain, and a man of about fifty with a grey moustache came in, but stopped in surprise at seeing so many people. He was tempted to back out. But his eyes met

those of a journalist who had recognized him, and who nudged his neighbour. So he walked in, affecting unconcern, and tapping the ash off his cigarette.

He looked resplendent. He was most elegantly dressed. You sensed that this was a man accustomed to high living and no stranger to night haunts.

He went straight to the bar and addressed Génaro:

‘You’re the owner of this club?’

‘Yes, monsieur.’

‘I’m Monsieur Delfosse. Apparently my son owes you some money.’

‘Victor!’

Victor hurried over.

‘This is Monsieur René’s father, who wants to know how much his son owes.’

‘Let me check in my book. Monsieur René alone, or with his friend? Er ... A hundred and fifty, plus seventy-five, plus the ten, and the hundred and twenty from yesterday.’

Delfosse passed him a thousand-franc note and snapped:

‘Keep the change.’

‘Oh thank you, sir, thank you very much! Won’t you stay for a drink?’

But Delfosse senior was heading for the door, without looking left or right. He went past the chief inspector, whom he did not know. As he went out, he almost bumped into a new arrival, but took no notice and climbed into his car.

And yet the main event of the evening was about to take place. The man who had just entered was large and broad-shouldered, with heavy jowls and an impassive expression.

Adèle, who was the first to see him, no doubt because she was watching the door, opened her eyes wide and looked taken aback.

The newcomer went straight up to her and held out his plump hand.

‘How are you, since the other night?’

She tried to smile.

‘Quite well, thank you. And yourself?’

The journalists murmured among themselves as they watched him.

‘Bet you anything that’s him.’

‘But he wouldn’t just walk in here tonight.’

As if in a show of bravado, the man pulled out a tobacco pouch from his pocket and began packing his pipe.

'A pale ale,' he called to Victor, who was passing with a tray of glasses.

Victor nodded, and went on, making his way round by the two policemen, to whom he whispered:

'That's him!'

How did the news spread? At any rate, a minute later everyone was staring at the broad-shouldered man, who was perching with one thigh on a bar stool, the other leg dangling, and sipping his English beer while looking round at the clientele through his misted glass.

Three times, Génaro had to snap his fingers to make the jazz band start another number. And even the professional dancer, as he guided his partner round the polished dance-floor, did not take his eyes off the man.

Chief Inspector Delvigne and his colleague exchanged glances. The reporters were watching them.

'OK?'

And they stood up together and went casually over to the bar. The chief inspector leaned his elbows on the counter next to the newcomer. Girard stood behind him, ready to block his exit.

The band played on. And yet everyone had the feeling that there was an abnormal silence.

'Excuse me, monsieur. But were you staying at the Hôtel Moderne?'

A heavy gaze was turned on the speaker.

'Yes. What of it?'

'I believe you forgot to fill out the police form.'

Adèle was close by, eyes fixed on the stranger. Génaro was uncorking a bottle of champagne.

'If this is not too inconvenient, would you mind coming to my office to fill it in? But carefully does it. No fuss please.'

Delvigne was scrutinizing his interlocutor's features and trying to identify, without success, what was so impressive about him.

'Now, will you follow me, please, monsieur?'

'Just a moment.'

The man put his hand in his pocket. Inspector Girard, thinking that he was about to pull out a revolver, made the mistake of drawing his own.

People round them stood up. A woman screamed. But the man had only been feeling for some coins, which he placed on the counter, saying:

‘Right, after you.’

Their exit was far from discreet. The sight of the revolver had terrified the customers, otherwise they would no doubt have crowded round the three men. The chief inspector went first. Then the strange man. Finally Girard, red-faced because of his inappropriate move.

A photographer’s flashbulb popped. A car was at the door.

‘Be so good as to get in.’

It took no more than three minutes to drive to police headquarters. Officers on the night shift were playing cards and drinking beers fetched from a nearby café.

The man walked in as if he owned the place, took off his bowler hat, and lit a large pipe, which suited his square face.

‘Your papers?’

Delvigne was nervous. There was something he didn’t like about the whole affair, but he knew not what.

‘No, I’ve no papers on me at all!’

‘What did you do with your suitcase when you left the Hôtel Moderne?’

‘No idea!’

The chief inspector gave him a sharp look, feeling anxious, since he had the impression that his interlocutor was now playing a game with him, like a child.

‘Surname, first name, occupation, address ...’

‘Is that your office over there?’

A door that opened on to a small office, empty and unlit.

‘What of it?’

‘Come inside.’

And it was the broad-shouldered man who went in first, switched on the light and closed the door.

‘Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, from the Police Judiciaire in Paris,’ he said, puffing at his pipe. ‘Come, my dear colleague, I think we’ve made good progress this evening. That’s a splendid pipe you have there!’



7. The Unusual Journey

‘The journalists won’t be able to come in here, will they? Would you lock the door? Better if we can talk undisturbed.’

Chief Inspector Delvigne looked at his colleague with the involuntary respect that is accorded, whether in the French provinces, or even more in Belgium, to anything Parisian. He was also embarrassed by his blunder, and started to apologize.

‘Not at all,’ said Maigret firmly. ‘I absolutely wanted to be arrested! And I’ll go further: in a little while, you’re going to take me to prison, and I’ll stay there as long as need be. Your own inspectors must believe that I really have been arrested.’

He couldn’t help it. He burst out laughing at the sight of his Belgian colleague’s face. Delvigne was looking askance at Maigret, wondering what attitude to adopt. It was clear that he was afraid of appearing ridiculous. And he was trying in vain to guess whether his companion was joking or not.

Maigret’s laughter prompted his own.

‘Come off it! You’re having me on! Put you in prison? Ha, ha, that’s a good one!’

‘I promise you, I insist on it.’

‘Ha, ha!’

Delvigne resisted for a long time. And when he realized that his interlocutor was quite serious, he was devastated.

They were sitting face to face now, looking at each other across a table laden with files. From time to time, Maigret stole an admiring glance at his colleague’s

meerschaum pipe.

‘You’ll soon understand why,’ he said. ‘My apologies for not putting you in the picture earlier, but you’ll see in a minute that it wasn’t possible. The crime was committed on Wednesday, wasn’t it? Right. Well on Monday, I was in my office, Quai des Orfèvres in Paris, when I was handed the business card of a certain Graphopoulos. As usual, before seeing him, I phoned the immigration office to find out who he was. They didn’t have anything on him. Graphopoulos had only just arrived in Paris. In my office, he gave me the impression of a man who was extremely anxious. He explained that he travelled a good deal, that he had reason to believe that his life was in danger, and he asked how much it would cost to be guarded day and night by a police inspector.

‘We often get these requests, so I quoted him a rate. He insisted that he needed someone of senior rank, but on the other hand he replied evasively to my question about the kind of danger he was in, and who his potential enemies might be. He gave his address as the Grand Hôtel, and that evening, I sent round the inspector he had asked for. Next day, I found out more about him. The Greek embassy told me that he was the son of a wealthy banker in Athens, and that he travelled all over Europe living like a playboy. I expect you took him for a run-of-the-mill chancer.’

‘Yes, we did. Are you sure that—?’

‘Wait. On Tuesday evening, the inspector sent to protect Graphopoulos told me with the utmost concern that our man had spent all his time trying to lose him. Little tricks, the kind we all know, going into a house by the front door and out through the back, taking a succession of taxis or public transport. And he also said Graphopoulos had bought a plane ticket for a flight to London on Wednesday morning. I can tell you that the idea of going to London, especially by plane, appealed to me, so I took over the protection myself.

‘Well, on Wednesday morning, Graphopoulos left the Grand, but instead of going to Le Bourget, he had himself driven to the Gare du Nord, and there he bought a rail ticket to Berlin. We travelled in the same dining car. I don’t know whether he recognized me. He certainly didn’t speak a word to me.

‘When the train reached Liège, he got out. So I followed him. He took a room in the Hôtel Moderne, so I took one next to his. We both dined in a restaurant behind the Theatre Royal.’

‘Ah, that’ll be La Bécasse,’ Delvigne interrupted. ‘You get a good meal there.’

‘Yes, especially the kidneys *liègeoise*, you’re right. And I had the impression that it was the first time that Graphopoulos had set foot in Liège. He got the name of the hotel from the station. And the people at the hotel sent him to La Bécasse. And then the doorman at the restaurant talked to him about the Gai-Moulin.’

‘So he ended up there by chance,’ said Delvigne thoughtfully.

‘I don’t know that for sure. I went into the nightclub a little after him. One of the club’s dancers was sitting at his table, as you might expect. In fact I was very bored, because I hate that kind of place. My first thought was that he’d take her back to his room. So when I saw her go out alone, I went with her, and put a few questions to her. She said it was the first time she’d seen the stranger, that he’d asked her to rendezvous with him later, but she said she wasn’t going to go, and added that he was boring. And that’s all. I came back. The club owner was on his way out with the waiter. So I assumed that Graphopoulos had left while my back was turned, and I looked for him in the nearby streets. I went as far as the hotel, to check whether he’d gone back there. And when I returned to the Gai-Moulin, the doors were shut and there was no light inside. In short, I got nowhere at all. But I didn’t see it as a disaster. I asked a policeman if there were other nightclubs open, and he named four or five, which I conscientiously visited, but with no sign of my Greek.’

‘Extraordinary,’ murmured Delvigne.

‘Wait! I could have come to you and pursued my inquiry in cooperation with the Liège police. But since I’d been seen at the Gai-Moulin, I preferred not to alert the murderer. There are only a few possible suspects. I started with the two youngsters, whose nervousness I had noticed. That led me to Adèle, and the dead man’s cigarette-case. You rushed things, though. You arrested Jean Chabot. Delfosse escaped. General confrontation. But I only learned about all that from the papers. And at the same time, I discovered I was wanted myself, as a suspect. That’s all. So I took advantage of that.’

‘Took advantage?’

‘A question, first. Do you think those boys are guilty?’

‘To be honest—’

‘Good, I see you don’t. Nobody does, and the murderer realizes that any minute now you’ll be looking elsewhere. So he’s taking precautions, and we shouldn’t expect him to make silly mistakes. On the other hand, there’s a big presumption against the “man with broad shoulders”, as the papers call him. So the man with broad shoulders has contrived to get himself arrested, in rather dramatic circumstances. Everyone will think the real culprit was taken into custody this evening. We need to reinforce that opinion. Tomorrow, people will hear that I’m in Saint-Léonard and that a confession is confidently expected.’

‘And you really want to go to prison?’

‘Why not?’

Delvigne found it hard to take this in.

‘Of course you would be able to move about freely.’

‘Not at all! On the contrary I’d like you to have me subjected to the strictest conditions!’

‘You have an odd way of going about things in Paris!’

‘No, no. It’s as I told you, the culprit or culprits need to think they are out of danger. If there is a culprit ...’

This time the Belgian with the ginger moustache really did give a start.

‘What do you mean! You’re surely not insinuating that Graphopoulos bashed his own head in, jumped into a large basket, and got someone to carry it to the park!’

Maigret’s big eyes were full of innocence.

‘You never know, do you?’

And as he filled his pipe:

‘Time for you to have me escorted to prison now. But first, we’d better agree between ourselves a certain number of points. Would you be good enough to take notes?’

He spoke quite simply. There was even a little humility in his tone of voice. But all the same he was quite unambiguously taking charge of the investigation, without seeming to.

‘Go ahead.’

1. *Monday: Graphopoulos asks for protection from the Paris police.*

2. *Tuesday: he tries to shake off the inspector who is meant to be watching over him.*
3. *Wednesday: after buying an air ticket for London, he gets a rail ticket for Berlin but leaves the train at Liège.*
4. *He doesn't seem to know the town at all, and ends up at the Gai-Moulin where he does nothing of an exceptional nature.*
5. *When I accompany the dancer out, there are still four other people in the club: Chabot and Delfosse, hiding on the cellar steps; the owner and Victor in the bar area.*
6. *When I return, the owner and Victor are on their way out, locking up. Chabot and Delfosse, by their own account, are still there.*
7. *The young men claim they came out of the cellar a quarter of an hour after the club was closed, and that by then Graphopoulos was dead.*
8. *If that is true, then the crime could have been committed while I was accompanying the dancer down the street. And in that case, it would have been committed by Génaro and Victor.*
9. *If it is not true, then the murder could have been committed at that time by Delfosse and Chabot themselves.*
10. *Chabot could be lying, and if so, nothing proves the murder took place inside the club.*
11. *The murderer might have moved the body himself, but it is also possible that transport was provided by someone else.*
12. *Next day, Adèle is in possession of the cigarette-case, but she says it was given her by Delfosse.*
13. *The statements by Génaro, the dancer and Victor all agree in contradicting the allegations of Chabot.*

Maigret stopped speaking and puffed a few times on his pipe, as his companion looked up anxiously.

‘Never heard the like!’ he murmured.

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s so complicated, this case, when you look at it in detail.’

Maigret stood up.

‘Time for bed! Are the mattresses comfortable in Saint-Léonard?’

‘You really want to go there, then?’

‘Oh, by the way, I’d quite like to have the cell next to the kid Chabot. Tomorrow, I’ll probably ask you to stage a meeting with him.’

‘Perhaps we’ll have found his friend Delfosse by then.’

‘No matter.’

‘Do you really think they’re innocent? The examining magistrate won’t hear of letting anyone go. And now I think of it, I’ll have to tell him the truth about you.’

‘Well, leave it as long as you can, if possible. What’s going on outside?’

‘Journalists, I expect. I’m going to have to make a statement to the press. Who shall I say you are?’

‘I have no identity! An unknown person. No papers on me at all.’

Chief Inspector Delvigne was still uneasy in his mind. He continued to steal glances at Maigret, his anxiety tinged with admiration.

‘I don’t understand any of this!’

‘Neither do I.’

‘It’s almost as if Graphopoulos came to Liège to get himself killed. And while I think of it, it’s high time to inform his family. I’m seeing the Greek consul tomorrow morning.’

Maigret had picked up his bowler hat, and was ready to leave.

‘Don’t treat me too politely in front of the press,’ he advised.

The chief inspector opened the door. In the outer office half a dozen reporters were clustered round a man whom Delvigne recognized.

It was the manager of the Hôtel Moderne who had been in earlier that afternoon. He was talking animatedly to the journalists, who were taking notes. Suddenly, he turned round and saw Maigret. His face flushed crimson, and he pointed at him.

‘But that’s him!’ he cried. ‘There’s no doubt about that!’

‘I know. He has just admitted he stayed at the hotel.’

‘And did he also admit he took the basket?’

Delvigne looked uncomprehending.

‘What basket?’

‘Well, the laundry basket, for heaven’s sake! With the kind of staff we have these days, I might never have noticed.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Here’s what I mean. On every landing in the hotel, there’s a big wicker basket for dirty linen. Well, just now, they came back from the laundry, and I noticed myself that one of them was missing. The one from the third floor. I asked the chambermaid. She claims she thought they’d taken it for repairs because the lid didn’t fit properly.’

‘What about the linen?’

‘Well, that’s the extraordinary thing! The linen from there had been put in the second-floor basket.’

‘Are you sure that your basket is the one that was used to move the corpse?’

‘I’ve just got back from the morgue, where they showed it to me.’

He was panting. He couldn’t get over being so closely involved in the affair. But the person most affected was Chief Inspector Delvigne, who dared not even look at Maigret. He forgot about the reporters and their previous agreement.

‘What have you got to say about that?’

‘Nothing,’ said Maigret, imperturbably.

‘Look here,’ said the hotel manager. ‘He could have taken the basket out without being seen. To get in at night, you ring the bell, and the porter operates the cord without getting out of bed. But to let yourself out, you just have to turn the door handle.’

One reporter handy with his pencil was making a rapid sketch of Maigret, whom he represented with heavy jowls and as unsavoury an appearance as possible.

Delvigne ran his hand through his hair and blurted out:

‘Come back into my office a minute.’

He didn’t know where to look. A reporter asked him:

‘Has he confessed?’

‘No comment!’

And Maigret replied calmly:

‘I warn you that I do not intend to answer any more questions.’

‘Girard, bring the car up!’

‘Should I sign a statement,’ the hotel manager was asking.

‘Presently!’

Chaos. And all the while Maigret simply stood smoking his pipe and looking round at those present, one after another.

‘Handcuffs?’ Girard asked.

‘Yes. No. Come over here, you.’

He was in a hurry to be alone in the car with his opposite number.

As they drove through the deserted streets, he asked, almost begging:

‘What do you think that means?’

‘What?’

‘This business about the laundry basket. That man is virtually accusing you of having taken a wicker basket from the hotel. The one they found the corpse in.’

‘Yes, he did seem to be insinuating that.’

The word ‘insinuating’ had a delicious irony to it, considering the passionate exclamations of the hotel manager.

‘Is that true?’

Instead of replying, Maigret went on:

‘The basket must have been taken out either by Graphopoulos or by me. If by Graphopoulos, you must admit it’s astonishing. A man who takes the trouble to fetch his own coffin.’

‘Excuse me ... But just now, when you told me who you were, I didn’t think of asking you for ... um ... some proof of identity.’

Maigret felt in his pockets and handed his companion his detective chief inspector’s badge.

‘Yes, of course. My apologies. The basket business now ...’

And with a sudden burst of courage, helped by the darkness inside the car:

‘Do you know that even if you hadn’t asked me to, I’d have been obliged to arrest you, after that man’s clear statement?’

‘Naturally.’

‘Were you expecting that accusation?’

‘Me? No!’

‘And you think Graphopoulos took the basket himself?’

‘I don’t think anything yet.’

Delvigne, frustrated, the blood flooding his cheeks, fell silent and retreated into his corner. When they arrived at the prison, he went quickly through the admission formalities, avoiding looking his companion in the face.

‘The warder will now take charge of you,’ he said by way of farewell.

He must have felt rather bad about that. In the street, he wondered whether he had not been somewhat too impolite towards his colleague.

‘But he asked me himself to make it look as though I was being tough.’

Yes, but not when they were alone. And that had been before the statement by the hotel manager. Could it be that Maigret, just because he came from Paris, was having some fun at his expense?

‘Well, if so, he’ll regret it ...’

Girard was waiting in the office, reading through the list of points made by Maigret.

‘Making progress, then?’ he said approvingly as the chief arrived.

‘Oh, you think so, do you?’

His tone made Girard open his eyes wide.

‘But ... the arrest of that man ... the laundry basket that—’

‘The basket ... yes! Oh yes, talk about it all you like! The basket that ...! Get me the telegraph switchboard!’

And when he had a line, he dictated a wire:

Police Judiciaire, Paris

*Please send soonest detailed description and if possible fingerprints Detective Chief Inspector
Maigret. Police headquarters, Liège.*

‘What’s that all about?’ asked Girard.

It wasn’t the best thing to say. His chief looked at him furiously.

‘Nothing at all, you hear? It means I’m fed up with stupid questions. It means I want a bit of peace.’

And realizing how ridiculous his anger was, he stopped short and simply said, ‘Oh damn and blast!’

Then he shut himself in his office, alone with the thirteen points on Maigret’s list.



8. Chez Jeanne

‘Behave yourself!’ said the plump woman, with a throaty chuckle. ‘They might see us ...’

Standing up, she moved towards the bay window, looked through the net curtain and asked:

‘Are you waiting for the Brussels train?’

It was a small café behind the Guillemins railway station. The large room was clean, the light-coloured floor tiles had been newly washed and the tables carefully polished.

‘Come back and sit down,’ muttered the man sitting in front of a glass of beer.

‘Promise you’ll behave yourself, then?’

And the woman sat down, lifted the man’s hand from the banquette where it was trailing, and placed it on the table.

‘You’re a salesman, are you?’

‘What makes you think that?’

‘Oh, nothing. I don’t know. No! Stop it! If you don’t keep your hands to yourself, I’m going to stand at the door. Tell me what you want to drink instead. Same again? One for me, too?’

What made this café seem somehow difficult to place was perhaps its very cleanliness, the perfect order, and a feeling that it was more like a domestic interior than a public establishment. The counter was very small, without a beer pump, and there were scarcely as many as twenty glasses on the shelves. On a table by the window lay some sewing, and elsewhere a basket of string beans, which someone had started to prepare for cooking.

It was tidy. It smelled of soup, not alcohol. Anyone going in would feel they were disturbing a domestic scene.

The woman, who was about thirty-five, was buxom, with something both respectable and maternal about her. She kept pushing away the hand that the timid customer was trying to put on her knee.

‘What line are you in? Foodstuffs?’

Suddenly she listened. A staircase led from the café straight to the first floor. A sound could be heard as of someone getting out of bed.

‘Excuse me a moment.’

She went to listen, then into the passageway, calling:

‘Monsieur Henry!’

When she returned to the customer, he was looking nervous, the more so when a man, bare-necked and in shirt-sleeves, came in from the back room, and tiptoed up the stairs. They could see his legs, then nothing.

‘What is it?’

‘Nothing. Just this young man who got drunk last night – we put him to bed.’

‘And Monsieur Henry is ... your husband?’

She laughed, which made her large soft breasts quiver.

‘He’s the boss. I’m just the waitress. Careful, I’m sure someone can see you.’

‘But I would like ...’

‘What?’

The man was red in the face. He was unsure now what was and was not permitted. He gazed at his companion’s plump tempting flesh with shining eyes.

‘Can’t we be alone for a few minutes?’ he whispered.

‘Are you crazy? What for? This is a respectable house.’

She stopped short and listened once more. An argument was taking place upstairs. Monsieur Henry was replying in a calm, controlled voice to someone who was complaining loudly.

‘He’s just a kid,’ the big woman explained. ‘Makes you feel sorry for him. Not twenty years old, but he drank himself silly. And he was paying for everyone’s drinks, showing off, and a lot of people took advantage.’

The door was opening upstairs. The voices became clearer.

‘I tell you I had hundreds of francs in my pockets!’ The young man was wailing. ‘I’ve been robbed! I want my money!’

'Calm down. There are no thieves here. If you hadn't been as tight as a tick—'
'But you served me the drinks—'

'If I serve drinks, it's because I expect people to have the sense to keep an eye on their wallets. And even so, I had to stop you. You went and pulled in some girl off the street, because you said the waitress wasn't being nice to you. Then you wanted a room for the night. And I don't know what else.'

'Give me back my money!'

'I haven't got your money, and if you go on shouting like that, I'll call the police.'

Monsieur Henry was perfectly calm. But the young man coming down the staircase backwards was not, as he went on arguing. He looked tired, with rings under his eyes and a sour mouth.

'You're a pack of thieves!'

'Say that again!'

And Monsieur Henry ran down the steps and grabbed the young man's collar. It almost became ugly. The boy pulled a revolver from his pocket, shouting:

'Let me go, or else ...'

The travelling salesman flattened himself against the back of his seat, in his fear grabbing the arm of the waitress, who had lurched forward.

There was no need. Monsieur Henry, a man well used to fights, had struck his opponent's forearm sharply, so that the gun fell from the youth's hand.

Panting heavily nevertheless, Monsieur Henry ordered the waitress:

'Open the door!'

And when she had obeyed, he propelled the young man outside with such force that he ended up sprawled in the gutter. The café owner picked up the gun and threw it after him.

'Snotty kids, coming in and insulting a man in his own home! Yesterday, there he was, showing off and flashing his money around.'

He smoothed down his hair, glanced at the door and saw a uniformed policeman outside.

'You're my witness that he threatened me, right?' he said to the crestfallen customer. 'Anyway, the police know the house.'

On the pavement, René Delfosse, now back on his feet, his clothes mud-stained, was gnashing his teeth with fury, and responding to the policeman's

questions, though hardly knowing what he was saying.

'You were robbed, were you? But what's your name, for a start, where are your papers? And whose gun is this?'

A few people had gathered. Passengers were leaning out from a passing tram.

'Right! Come along with me to the station!'

On arrival, Delfosse fell into such a rage that the policeman received several kicks to his legs. When the local chief inspector questioned him, Delfosse started by claiming that he was French, and had arrived in Liège only the day before.

'In that café, they got me drunk, and then they robbed me.'

But an officer in the corner was observing him. He had a word in his chief's ear. The latter smiled with satisfaction.

'I think perhaps your name is really René Delfosse?'

'That's none of your business!'

They had seldom seen a complainant look so furious. His face was contorted, his mouth twisted.

'And the money they took – wasn't that money stolen from a certain dancer?'

'That's a lie!'

'Calm down, calm down, you can explain at headquarters. Will someone please phone Chief Inspector Delvigne and ask him what we should do with this character?'

'I'm hungry,' grumbled Delfosse, still looking like a spoiled child.

A shrug.

'You've got no right to leave me starving ... I shall make a complaint—'

'Go and fetch him a sandwich from next door.'

Delfosse took a couple of bites, then threw the rest of the sandwich on the floor in disgust.

'Hello? Yes, yes ... He's right here ... Very well. I'll have him brought round to you at once ... No ... Nothing.'

Seated in the car between two officers, Delfosse at first maintained a sullen silence. Then, without anyone having asked him, he muttered:

'But it wasn't *me* that killed anyone, it was Chabot.'

His companions paid no attention.

'My father will complain to the provincial governor! He's a friend of his. I haven't done anything wrong! First my wallet was stolen and then that café owner wanted to throw me on the street today without a bean.'

'But the revolver does belong to you, doesn't it?'

'No, it's his. He threatened to shoot me if I made a fuss. Just ask the other customer who was there.'

As they entered the headquarters building, he pulled himself upright, trying to assume an important and confident air.

'Ah, so this is the runaway!' said an inspector as he shook hands with his colleagues and looked Delfosse up and down. 'I'll tell the boss.'

He came back at once, saying:

'He'll have to wait!'

Anxiety and annoyance could be seen on the face of the young man, who refused the seat offered him. He started to light a cigarette, but it was taken away from him.

'Not in here.'

'But *you're* smoking!'

And he heard the inspector mutter as he walked away: 'Proper little turkeycock we've got here!'

Around him, men went on smoking, writing, working on files, sometimes exchanging a few words.

An electric bell sounded. The inspector, without moving from his place, said to Delfosse:

'You can go in to the boss now. The door at the end.'

It was not a large office. The air was blue with smoke and the stove, which had been lit for the first time that autumn, was roaring loudly at every gust of wind.

Chief Inspector Delvigne sat commandingly in his chair. Near the rear window, another figure was seated with his back to the light.

'Come in. Sit down.'

The other figure sat upright. In the half-light, the pale face of Jean Chabot appeared, staring at his friend.

Delfosse began sarcastically:

'What do you want from me?'

‘Nothing, young man. Just for you to answer a few questions.’

‘I’ve done nothing wrong.’

‘I haven’t accused of you of anything yet.’

Looking across at Chabot, René muttered angrily:

‘What’s he been telling you? A pack of lies, I’ll bet.’

‘Calm down. And try to answer my questions. And you, over there, stay where you are.’

‘But—’

‘I told you to stay where you are. And now, young Delfosse, could you tell me what you were doing at Chez Jeanne?’

‘They robbed me—’

‘But why were you there at all? You got there yesterday afternoon, already the worse for drink. You tried to get the waitress upstairs with you, and when she refused, you dragged in a woman from the street.’

‘I am entitled to—’

‘Then you paid for drinks all round. For hours, you were the big attraction. Until in the end you collapsed under the table. The owner took pity on you, and had you put to bed.’

‘He robbed me.’

‘Well, what happened was that you threw around money that didn’t belong to you. To be precise, the money you’d taken from Adèle’s handbag in the morning.’

‘That’s not true!’

‘And from the same money, you had earlier bought a revolver. What for?’

‘Because I felt like buying a revolver.’

Chabot’s face was a sight to behold. He was staring at his friend in indescribable panic, as if he couldn’t believe his ears. He seemed suddenly to be discovering a different, much more frightening Delfosse. He would have liked to interrupt, to tell him to stop saying such things.

‘Why did you steal money from Adèle?’

‘She gave it me.’

‘That’s not what she says. She accuses you of taking it.’

‘She’s lying! She gave it me to get some train tickets, because we were going to go away together.’

It was as if he were throwing out sentences at random, without worrying about contradicting himself.

‘Perhaps you’ll tell me now that you weren’t hiding, two nights ago, on the cellar steps in the Gai-Moulin?’

Chabot leaned forward, as if to warn him: ‘Look, no point denying it. I had to ...’

But Delfosse was already standing up, turning to his friend and shouting to Delvigne:

‘He told you that! He was lying. He wanted me to stay with him. I don’t *need* money! My father’s rich! I only have to ask him. It was all *his* idea—’

‘So you left at once, did you?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you went straight home?’

‘Yes.’

‘After eating mussels and chips in a shop on Rue du Pont-d’Avroy?’

‘Er, yes, I think so.’

‘And at that point you were with Chabot! The shop owner told us that!’

Chabot was twisting his hands and his expression was imploring.

‘But I haven’t *done* anything,’ insisted Delfosse.

‘I didn’t say you’d done anything.’

‘So?’

‘So nothing.’

Delfosse breathed again, and glanced down.

‘It was you that decided when the two of you should come out from the cellar?’

‘No, that’s not true.’

‘Well, at any rate you were the one who went out first, and were the first to see the corpse.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘René,’ cried Jean, who could bear it no longer.

Once more, the chief inspector ordered him to sit back down and not to speak.

But a moment later he was stammering, as if all his strength had left him:

‘I don’t understand why he’s lying. We didn’t kill anyone. We didn’t even have time to take any money. He went first. He lit a match. I hardly saw the

Turk. I just glimpsed a shape on the floor. But he even told me afterwards that he had one eye open and the other shut.'

'How fascinating!' said Delfosse sarcastically.

At that moment, Chabot looked five years younger than his friend, and the picture of indecision. He didn't know what to think. And he knew he would not be able to convince anyone, being the weaker of the two.

Delvigne looked at them each in turn.

'Let's see if you can get your stories straight, children. You were scared stiff, so you rushed out in such a hurry that you didn't close the door. And you went on to eat mussels and chips.'

And suddenly he said, looking straight at Delfosse:

'Tell me, did you touch the corpse?'

'Me? Not on your life!'

'And was there a wicker laundry basket anywhere near it?'

'No ... I didn't see anything.'

'How many times have you taken money from the till at your uncle's?'

'Did Chabot say that?'

And he clenched his fists.

'Filthy bastard! He's got a cheek ... He's making things up. Because what *he* did, he pinched money out of the petty cash. And I gave him enough to pay it back.'

'Stop it,' Chabot begged, hands together.

'You're lying, Chabot, you know you are!'

'No *you* are. But René, listen! The murderer ... has—'

'What? What are you on about?'

'I'm telling you, the murderer has been arrested. You—'

Delfosse looked at Delvigne and asked in a hesitant voice:

'What's he saying now? That the ... the murder—'

'Don't you read the papers? Of course, you were sleeping off the booze. And now you're going to tell me whether you recognize the man who was at the Gai-Moulin that evening, and next day followed you in the street.'

René mopped his forehead, without daring to look across at his friend in the corner.

A bell rang in the office next door. Someone must have been sent to fetch Maigret from a nearby room. The door opened and he came in, escorted by Girard.

'Get a move on! Stand here in the light, please. Now Delfosse, do you recognize this man?'

'Yes, it's him!'

'And you had never seen him, before that night?'

'No!'

'And he didn't speak to you?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'And for example, when you left the Gai-Moulin, he wasn't prowling about outside? Think. I want you to search your memory.'

'Wait a bit. Yes. Maybe. There was someone lurking in a corner, and now I think of it, perhaps it was him.'

'Perhaps?'

'Yes. Definitely, yes.'

Standing in the small office, Maigret looked enormous. Yet when he spoke, his voice was very mild, almost gentle.

'But you didn't have a torch, did you?'

'Well, no. Why?'

'And you didn't turn the lights on inside the club. So you must have struck a match? Can you tell me how far you were from the corpse?'

'I ... I don't know.'

'Further than the distance across this office?'

'About the same.'

'Right, four metres or so. And you were scared! This was your first burglary. You saw a shape on the floor, and you immediately assumed it was a corpse. You didn't go close to. You didn't touch it. So you can't be sure the man wasn't still breathing. Who was holding the match?'

'I was,' Delfosse confessed.

'And did it burn for long?'

'No, I dropped it at once.'

'So this famous corpse was only glimpsed for a few seconds. And you're sure are you, Delfosse, that you recognized Graphopoulos?'

'I saw his black hair.'

He looked round in astonishment. He was suddenly aware that he was undergoing a real interrogation, and being manipulated. He muttered crossly:

'I'm not going to answer anyone but the chief inspector.'

Delvigne had picked up the telephone. Delfosse shuddered when he heard the number he was requesting.

'Hello? Monsieur Delfosse? I just need to know whether you are still prepared to put up the fifty thousand francs bail. I've spoken to the examining magistrate, and he's referred the case to the criminal court. Yes. Right. No, don't trouble yourself. It's better if we deal with it directly.'

René Delfosse still did not understand. In his corner, Jean Chabot was sitting absolutely still.

'So you continue to insist, do you, Delfosse, that Chabot is responsible for everything?'

'Yes.'

'Very well, you are free to leave. Off you go back home. Your father has promised he won't be too hard on you. Wait a minute! Chabot, you're still claiming that Delfosse stole the money you were trying to get rid of?'

'It was him, he—'

'Well, in that case, you'll have to sort it out with him. Off with the pair of you! And don't draw attention to yourselves, try to be as inconspicuous as possible.'

Maigret had automatically pulled his pipe out of his pocket. But he didn't light it. He was gazing at the two young men, who looked astounded, not knowing what to say or do. Chief Inspector Delvigne had to stand up, and push them out of the door.

'No fighting now. Remember you're still answerable to the authorities.'

They walked quickly across the outer office and as they reached the door, Delfosse was already turning round angrily towards his companion and beginning to talk furiously, but his words were lost.

The telephone rang.

'Hello? Chief Inspector Delvigne? Forgive me for bothering you, monsieur, but ... this is Monsieur Chabot, Jean's father. May I ask if there is any news?'

The chief inspector smiled, put his meerschaum pipe on the table and winked at Maigret.

‘Delfosse has just left here, now, and your son was with him.’

A startled silence.

‘Yes. They’ll probably be getting home in a few minutes. Hello? May I advise you not to come down too heavily on the boy.’

It was raining. In the streets, Chabot and Delfosse walked along the pavements pushing through the crowds who did not recognize them. They were not carrying on a coherent conversation, but every hundred metres or so, one or other would turn towards his companion, and snarl something, receiving a hostile reply.

At the corner of Rue Puits-en-Soc, their paths diverged, one going right, the other left, to reach their homes.

‘He’s free, monsieur! They’ve realized that he’s innocent!’

And Monsieur Chabot was leaving his office, getting on the number 4 tram and standing by the driver, whom he had known for years.

‘Don’t have the tram break down, please! My son’s free! The chief inspector himself telephoned me to say it had all been a mistake.’

It was hard to tell whether he was laughing or crying. At any rate, a mist before his eyes made it impossible for him to see the familiar streets pass by.

‘And now I’ll get home before him! That would be best, because my wife might start scolding him. There are things women don’t understand ... Tell me, just between ourselves, did you ever believe for a second he was guilty?’

He was pitiful. He was begging the driver to say no.

‘Oh me, you know.’

‘But you must have had an opinion—’

‘Since my daughter went off and married a good-for-nothing who got her pregnant, I’m not a great believer in the youth of today.’

Maigret had sat down in the chair vacated by Jean Chabot, facing Delvigne’s desk, and had picked up the other man’s tobacco from the table.

‘Have you heard back from Paris?’

‘How did you know?’

‘Oh, come on, you would have guessed like I did. And the laundry basket? Has anyone discovered how it left the Hôtel Moderne?’

‘No, nothing doing!’

Delvigne was grumpy. He felt irritated with his Parisian counterpart.

‘Between ourselves, you’re playing us for fools, aren’t you? You know something, come on, tell me.’

‘No, it’s my turn to say nothing doing. I mean it! I have more or less the same facts to work on as you. In your place, I’d have done the same and let those boys go. And for instance, I’d be trying to find out what Graphopoulos stole from the Gai-Moulin.’

‘Stole?’

‘Or tried to steal.’

‘Him? The dead man?’

‘Or who he killed.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘Wait. Killed or tried to kill—’

‘You see, you *do* have some information I don’t.’

‘No, very little. The only difference between us is that you’ve been spending your time dashing about between here and the courts, getting phone calls, seeing people, while I was able to enjoy the peace and quiet of my cell in Saint-Léonard.’

‘So you thought about your thirteen points,’ said Delvigne, not without a trace of bitterness in his voice.

‘Well, not all of them. Some.’

‘For instance, the laundry basket.’

Maigret gave an innocent smile.

‘I’d better come clean right away. It was me. I took it out of the hotel.’

‘Empty?’

‘Not at all! With the corpse inside.’

‘So you’re saying that the crime—’

‘... was committed inside the Hôtel Moderne, in Graphopoulos’s room. And that is what is so provoking about the whole thing. Do you have a match?’



9. The Informer

Maigret settled into his chair, hesitated, as was his habit when about to launch into a long explanation, and sought for the right tone: plain speaking.

‘You’ll soon understand as much as I do, and you’ll be prepared to forgive me for cheating a little. Let’s start with Graphopoulos’s visit to police headquarters in Paris, asking for our protection. He doesn’t explain why he wants it. And next day, he behaves as if he regrets ever having applied to us.

‘The first explanation that might occur to you is simply that the man’s mad, or perhaps suffering from some kind of persecution mania. The next one is that he knows he’s in real danger, but on second thoughts, he doesn’t think he’s really protected, even by the police. The third theory is that he actually *needed*, for a short while, to be under observation.

‘I’ll explain. Here’s a man, not so young, in possession of a considerable fortune, and apparently quite free in his movements. He can take a plane, a train, stay in any palace he likes. What possible threat could scare him so much that he goes to the police? A jealous woman who says she’s going to kill him? Hardly. He could easily put plenty of distance between them. A personal enemy? But a man like ours, with a banker for a father, has the means to get anyone threatening him arrested. Not only is he frightened in Paris, he’s frightened on the train, and still frightened when he gets to Liège. From which I conclude that it isn’t an individual who is after him, but an organization, probably an international one.

‘I repeat, he’s rich. If some gang were after his money, they wouldn’t be threatening his life, and in any case, he could quite effectively be protected from

them by going to the authorities. But he goes on being scared, even with a policeman at his heels. The threat burdens him, and it exists in whichever town he goes to, in any circumstances. Exactly as if he had belonged to some secret society and somehow betrayed it, so that the members had passed judgement on him. Some kind of mafia, for example. Or a spy ring. There are quite a few Greeks in espionage. The intelligence people can tell us what Graphopoulos senior did during the last war ... Let's suppose that the son betrayed this kind of group, or perhaps simply decided he had had enough and wanted out. He's threatened with death. And he's informed that the sentence will be executed sooner or later. He comes to see me, but next day, he's gathered that this won't help, and he panics and starts acting as if he's lost control. But the opposite is also possible.'

'The opposite?' asked Delvigne in surprise. He had been following the account closely. 'I don't understand.'

'Graphopoulos is a rich man's son. At a loose end. During his travels, he joins some kind of outfit, let's say the mafia or a spy ring, as an amateur, just for kicks. He promises to obey his chiefs faithfully. And one day, they order him to kill someone—'

'So he goes to the police?'

'Follow me closely. They order him, for example, to come and kill someone here, in Liège. He's in Paris. Nobody suspects him. He is reluctant to obey, and in order not to have to do it, he goes to the police and asks for protection. He telephones his accomplices and says it's impossible to carry out his orders, because the French police are on his tracks. But the gang is not impressed by this, and tells him to go ahead anyway. That's the other possible explanation. Either one of the theories is right, or else our man is simply insane – but if that were the case, there'd be no reason to kill him at all.'

'It's disturbing,' agreed Chief Inspector Delvigne, doubtfully.

'So to sum up, when he leaves Paris, he comes to Liège, either to kill someone or to be killed.'

Maigret's pipe crackled. He had said all this in the most conversational tone.

'And at the end of the day, he's the one who gets killed, but that doesn't prove anything. Let's look again at the events of that evening. He goes to the Gai-Moulin, and spends the evening in the company of Adèle, the dancer. She says

goodbye to him and leaves the club in my company. When I return, the owner and Victor are leaving, too. The club is empty, apparently. I believe that Graphopoulos has left, and go to look for him in some other night spots.

‘At four in the morning, I get back to the Hôtel Moderne. Before going to my room, I am curious to know whether my Greek is back as well. I listen at the door and can hear no breathing. I open it, and find him, fully dressed, at the foot of the bed, with his skull smashed in by some heavy implement. That, put as briefly as possible, is my point of departure. His wallet has disappeared. And in the room there’s no document to give me any information, no weapon, no clue at all.’

Maigret did not wait for his colleague to intervene.

‘I spoke at the beginning about the mafia and espionage, at any rate some kind of international organization, which in my view would be the only explanation behind this case. It’s the perfect crime. The weapon has disappeared. There isn’t any line of inquiry to follow, or the slightest lead which might give a reasonable direction to the investigation.

‘If the police investigation had started with the Hôtel Moderne in the usual conditions, it would almost certainly have run into the sands. The people who were capable of this would have taken precautions. They would have foreseen everything. And because I’m sure that’s what they’ve done, I decide to confuse the issue. They left the corpse in the hotel? Very well, I’ll stuff it into a laundry basket and take it to the Botanical Gardens, with the collusion of a cab driver who, between ourselves, agreed to keep quiet for a hundred francs, which is really not a lot of money.

‘And next day, that’s where the corpse is found. Imagine what the murderer is going to think! He’ll be extremely worried, won’t he?

‘So isn’t there a chance that he’ll panic and give himself away somehow? I decide to be so prudent that I don’t even identify myself to the local police. It wouldn’t do for anything to leak out. I was at the Gai-Moulin myself that evening. It seems highly probable that the murderer was there too. And I have the list of customers from that night, so I find out about them all, starting with the two young lads, who had seemed very on edge. The number of suspects is small: Jean Chabot, René Delfosse, Génaro, Adèle, Victor. And perhaps, at an outside guess, one of the musicians or Joseph the other waiter. But I decide I’d

prefer to eliminate the boys from my list first. And just as I'm trying to finish dealing with them, you take action. You arrest Chabot! Delfosse runs away. And the papers announce that the crime was committed at the Gai-Moulin.'

Maigret gave a deep sigh and shifted his legs.

'I thought I'd been outwitted! I don't mind admitting it. Chabot seemed so certain that the corpse had been inside the club a quarter of an hour after closing.'

'But he did see it,' Delvigne interrupted.

'I beg your pardon! He *thought* he saw, by the light of a flickering match, lit for only a few seconds, a shape lying on the floor. It's Delfosse who claims it was a dead body. One eye open, one eye shut, as he said. But remember that both of them had just emerged from the cellar where they'd been standing in the dark a long while, and that both of them were scared stiff, it was their first real burglary ...

'Delfosse was the brains behind it. He dragged his friend along with him. But he was the first to panic when he saw the body on the ground. He's an unhealthy boy, neurotic and vicious. In other words, he has a lively imagination. He didn't touch the body! He didn't even approach it! He didn't strike another match. The pair of them fled and didn't go near the till.

'That's why I advised you to look into what Graphopoulos had come back to the Gai-Moulin for, after pretending to leave. This isn't a crime of passion, or a sordid crime, or an ordinary burglary. It's exactly the kind of thing the police doesn't manage to solve, most of the time, because we're up against people who are too clever and well organized. And that's why I allowed myself to be arrested. Keep on confusing the issue! Make the culprits think they're safe, that the police are on the wrong track! And in that way, provoke them into making a mistake.'

Delvigne didn't know what to think. He went on glaring at Maigret with resentment, and his face looked so comical that the other man burst out laughing, and added in gruffly cordial voice:

'Don't stare at me like that! Yes, all right, I cheated! I didn't tell you at once all I knew. Or rather I concealed something: the business with the laundry basket. But there's one thing you've got and I don't have.'

'What's that?'

‘Perhaps it’s the most crucial thing, just now. Which is why I’ve told you all this. The basket was found in the Botanical Gardens. Graphopoulos had on him only his business card, without an address. And yet by the same afternoon, you were already turning up at the Gai-Moulin and you knew that Chabot and Delfosse had been hiding on the back stairs. How did you know all that?’

This time, Delvigne smiled. It was his turn to have the upper hand. Instead of answering at once, he lit his pipe slowly, brushing off the ash with his finger.

‘Naturally, I have my informers,’ he said.

And he took his time again, even feeling the need to shift some of his papers.

‘I imagine you’re well supplied with them in Paris, too. In theory, all the nightclub owners act as my eyes and ears. In return for which I overlook certain little irregularities.’

‘So it was Génaro?’

‘The very same!’

‘Génaro came and told you that Graphopoulos had spent the evening at his club?’

‘Yes.’

‘And he discovered the cigarette ends on the stairs?’

‘Well, it was Victor who told him about that detail, and he asked me to come and have a look myself.’

Maigret was looking stormier by the minute, as his colleague became more cheerful.

‘So you have to admit we were quick off the mark,’ Delvigne went on.

‘Chabot was arrested. And if it hadn’t been for Monsieur Delfosse intervening with the bail money, both boys would still be under lock and key. If they haven’t killed anyone, which isn’t yet confirmed, they certainly meant to rob the club.’

He looked at his companion and had difficulty suppressing an ironic smile.

‘You look worried.’

‘Because it doesn’t simplify matters at all.’

‘What doesn’t?’

‘Génaro coming forward.’

‘You had him fingered as the murderer, admit it!’

‘No more than anyone else. And his coming forward doesn’t prove anything. At most, it shows he’s very confident.’

‘So, do you want to go back to your prison?’

Maigret fiddled with a matchbox, taking his time to reply. When he did, he seemed to be talking to himself.

‘Graphopoulos came to Liège to kill or be killed.’

‘We don’t know that.’

And suddenly Maigret burst out angrily:

‘Damn those kids!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Those wretched boys, they’ve spoiled everything. Unless ...’

‘Unless?’

‘Oh nothing.’

And he stood up, fuming, paced round the office where both men, smoking their pipes, had made the air unbreathable.

‘If the corpse had remained in the hotel, and if we had been able to go through the usual procedures, perhaps then—’ Delvigne began.

Maigret looked at him furiously.

They were, in fact, both feeling equally bad-tempered and their conversation reflected it. At the least word, they were ready to trade insults, and were not far off blaming each other for the lack of success of the investigation.

‘Haven’t got some tobacco, have you?’

Maigret said this in the same tone of voice he would have used to say, ‘You’re a fool!’

And he took the pouch from his colleague’s hands, tried in vain to suppress a grin, then shrugged.

And Delvigne grinned back. They understood each other. They were only maintaining their grumpy expressions for appearances’ sake.

The Belgian was the first to ask, in a more friendly voice, admitting his perplexity.

‘But what are we going to do now?’

‘All I know is that Graphopoulos was killed ...’

‘... in his hotel room!’

That was the last dig.

‘Yes, in his hotel room. Whether by Génaro, Victor, Adèle, or one of the two youngsters. None of them has the slightest alibi. Génaro and Victor claim to

have left each other at the corner of Rue Haute-Sauvinière and gone home. Adèle says she went to bed alone. Chabot and Delfosse ate mussels and chips—'

'While you were running round the other nightspots!'

'And you were fast asleep!'

They were now taking an almost jocular tone with each other.

'The only clue we have,' Maigret muttered, 'is that Graphopoulos allowed himself to be shut inside the Gai-Moulin – to steal something or to kill someone. When he heard a noise, he played dead, not imagining he'd really be dead an hour or so later.'

There came a hurried knock at the door. As it opened an inspector announced:

'Monsieur Chabot has come for a word. He hopes he's not disturbing you.'

Maigret and Delvigne looked at each other.

'Let him in.'

The accountant was nervous. He didn't know what to do with his bowler hat and hesitated when he saw Maigret in the office.

'Forgive me for ...'

'You had something to say to me?'

He had timed it badly. It was not the moment for pleasantries.

'That is ... Forgive me, but ... I wanted to thank you so much for ...'

'Your son is back home?'

'Yes, he got in an hour ago. He told me ...'

'What did he tell you?'

It was both grotesque and pitiful. Monsieur Chabot was trying to find the right expression. He was full of good will. But direct questions unsettled him and he forgot the words he had prepared.

A few poorly prepared words, which fell flat because of the unsympathetic atmosphere.

'He said ... That is to say, I wanted to thank you for your kindness ... He's not a bad boy at heart. But he's easily led by bad influence. He has promised ... His mother's in bed and he's at her side ... I promise, monsieur, that in future ... He is innocent, isn't he?'

The accountant was choking on his words. But he was making a great effort to remain calm and dignified.

'He's my only son ... and I wanted. Perhaps I have been too lenient ...'

‘Yes, far too lenient!’

And now Monsieur Chabot lost control entirely. Maigret turned away, since he sensed that this forty-year-old man, with his thin shoulders and curled moustaches, was about to weep.

‘I guarantee that in future ...’

And not knowing what else to say, he stammered:

‘Should I write to the examining magistrate too, to thank him?’

‘Yes, yes,’ muttered Delvigne, pushing him towards the door. ‘Excellent idea.’

He picked up the bowler hat, which had fallen to the floor, put it into the hand of its owner, who was slowly backing out.

‘Delfosse senior won’t think of thanking us,’ remarked Delvigne once the door was shut. ‘It’s true he dines every week with the provincial governor, and he’s on first-name terms with the royal prosecutor. Well, so now ...’

That ‘so now’ expressed weariness and disgust, as did the discouraged gesture with which he collected the papers from his desk.

‘So what do we do?’

At this time of day, Adèle was probably still asleep in her untidy bedroom, with its odours of intimacy and cooking. In the Gai-Moulin, Victor and Joseph would be moving slowly from table to table, wiping down the marble tops and polishing the mirrors with whiting.

‘Sir! Someone from the *Gazette de Liège* – you promised him—’

‘He’ll have to wait.’

Maigret had gone to sit down in a corner, looking irritable.

‘What we know beyond all doubt,’ said Delvigne suddenly, ‘is that Graphopoulos is dead.’

‘There’s an idea!’ said Maigret.

The other man looked at him, supposing he was being ironic.

And Maigret went on:

‘Yes, that’s the best thing to do. How many inspectors have you got here at the moment?’

‘Two or three. Why?’

‘Can this office be locked?’

‘Of course!’

'I imagine you would trust your inspectors more than you would the prison guards?'

Delvigne still did not understand.

'Right, give me your revolver. Don't worry. I'm going to fire a shot. You will go outside shortly afterwards and announce that the broad-shouldered man has killed himself, which amounts to a confession, and that the investigation is over.'

'And you want—'

'Listen. I'll fire this shot. After that, don't let anyone come in here. I assume it's possible to exit from this window?'

'What are you going to do?'

'I've got an idea. All right?'

And Maigret fired into the air, after taking up position in a chair with his back to the door. He didn't even bother to take his pipe out of his mouth. It didn't matter anyway. As people came running from the other offices, Delvigne stood in the doorway, announcing without conviction:

'It's nothing! It's the murderer. He's confessed.'

And he went out, locking the door, while Maigret scratched his head, looking extremely gloomy.

Adèle, Génaro, Victor, Delfosse and Chabot, he recited to himself like a litany. In the large office outside, the reporter from the *Gazette* was taking notes.

'You say he's confessed? But his identity is still unknown? Perfect. Can I use your phone? The late stock market edition comes out in an hour.'

'I say,' a cheerful inspector announced from the doorway, 'the pipes have arrived. Come and choose your own.'

But Chief Inspector Delvigne was pulling on his moustache without enthusiasm.

'Presently—'

'And guess what! Two francs cheaper than I thought!'

'Really?'

But he betrayed his real thoughts by muttering between his teeth.

'Him and his mafia ...'



10. Two Men in the Dark

‘You’re sure of your men?’

‘Well, no one will guess they’re from the police, for the simple reason that they aren’t. At the bar in the Gai-Moulin, I’ve posted my brother-in-law, who lives in Spa and who’s only in Liège for a day or two. The one keeping an eye on Adèle is a tax clerk. And the others are hidden or well camouflaged.’

It was a cool evening and the fine rain was making the asphalt slippery. Maigret had buttoned his heavy black coat up to his chin, and tucked a scarf round the bottom half of his face.

As an extra precaution, he did not venture outside the shadows of the little side-street from which he could see the Gai-Moulin’s illuminated sign.

Chief Inspector Delvigne, whose death had not been reported in the press, had no need to take such measures. He wasn’t even wearing an overcoat, and when it started to rain, he muttered crossly under his breath.

Their watch had begun at half past eight, before the doors of the club had opened. They had seen arrive in turn Victor, well ahead of the others, then Joseph, then the owner. It was Génaro who had switched on the sign, just as the musicians were approaching from Rue du Pont-d’Avroy.

At nine o’clock exactly, the sound of jazz music began issuing faintly from inside, and the doorman took up position at the entrance, counting the change in his pockets.

A few minutes later, Delvigne’s brother-in-law strolled into the club, followed soon after by the tax clerk. And the Belgian chief inspector summed up his strategic plan.

‘Apart from those two, and the two men watching the back door, I’ve got someone outside Adèle’s place, Rue de la Régence, another at the Delfosse home and one outside Chabot’s. And the room that Graphopoulos occupied in the Hôtel Moderne is being watched as well.’

Maigret said nothing. It was his idea. The papers had announced that the murderer of Graphopoulos had committed suicide. They had let it be understood that the investigation was over, and that it could be regarded as a crime of little importance.

‘Now, either we’ll get to the bottom of it tonight,’ Maigret had said to his colleague, ‘or we’re likely to spend months traipsing about looking for the answer.’

And he paced heavily and slowly up and down, up and down, puffing at his pipe, hunching his shoulders, and only replying with grunts to his companion’s attempts at conversation.

Delvigne, lacking the same degree of sangfroid, felt the need to talk, if only to pass the time.

‘Which direction do you think we’ll see any action from?’

But the other man simply looked at him with an incredulous expression as if to say: ‘What’s the point of disturbing all that air?’

It was a little before ten when Adèle appeared, followed by the shadow of the man from police headquarters. He passed close by his chief and whispered out of the corner of his mouth:

‘Nothing.’

And he walked on by. In the distance, Rue du Pont-d’Avroy was brightly lit, with trams going past almost every three minutes and crowds of people promenading slowly, despite the rain.

It was the traditional evening parade of the inhabitants of Liège. In the main street was a throng of people, families, girls linking arms, young men ogling passing women and a few elegant figures were strolling past as stiffly as if they were clad in gold.

In the little side-streets, there were other nightclubs of a more or less seedy kind, similar to the Gai-Moulin. Shadows lurked against the walls. Sometimes a woman would step out of the lamp light into the dark, waiting for a follower to catch up.

The two chief inspectors held a short consultation. Then walked a little way towards a hotel with its luminous globe of cloudy glass.

‘Do you really expect something from this?’

Maigret simply shrugged his shoulders. His expression was so bland that he seemed devoid of intelligence.

‘At any rate, I doubt very much that Chabot will fancy coming out tonight. Especially since his mother’s taken to her bed.’

Delvigne found it hard to accept his companion’s obstinate silence. He looked at his new pipe, which had not yet been seasoned.

‘By the way, remind me to give you one of these tomorrow. Then you’ll have a souvenir from Liège.’

Two customers entered the Gai-Moulin.

‘A tailor from Rue Hors-Château and a garage owner,’ Delvigne announced. ‘Regulars, the pair of them. Good-time Charlies, as they call them here.’

But someone was coming out, and they had to peer through the gloom to recognize him.

It was Victor, who had exchanged his work clothes for a suit and overcoat. He was walking quickly. An inspector at once started shadowing him.

‘Well, well!’ whistled Delvigne.

Maigret heaved a sigh and looked daggers at his companion. Could this Belgian not keep his mouth shut for a couple of minutes?

Maigret’s hands were thrust deep inside his pockets. And although nothing betrayed it, he missed not the slightest changes in his surroundings.

He was the first to spot René Delfosse, with his scrawny neck and his look of an overgrown schoolboy, who appeared in the street, hesitated, then changed pavements a couple of times, before at last heading for the door of the Gai-Moulin.

‘Well, well!’ repeated Delvigne.

‘Yes.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing.’

Maigret might not wish to talk, but he was so interested that he lost a little of his determined neutrality. He even moved forward, a little imprudently, since the gas lamp then lit up the top half of his face.

Not for long. Delfosse spent scarcely ten minutes in the club. When he came out, he started walking fast, straight towards Rue du Pont-d'Avroy.

A few seconds later, Delvigne's brother-in-law came out in turn and looked around inquiringly. A whistle attracted him over.

'Well?'

'Delfosse sat down with the dancer.'

'And?'

'They went off together to the cloakroom, then he left, while she went back to her seat.'

'Did Adèle take her handbag with her?'

'Yes, a little black velvet pouch.'

'Come on!' said Maigret.

And he strode off at such a pace that his companions could hardly keep up with him.

'What shall I do?' asked the brother-in-law.

'Go back inside, of course!'

And Maigret dragged Delvigne away. In the main street, they could no longer see the young man, who had a hundred-metre start on them, since there were so many people about. But when they reached the corner of Rue de la Régence, they glimpsed a figure almost running, keeping close to the houses.

'Well, well,' Delvigne could not help saying.

'He's going to her place,' said Maigret. 'He'll have asked her for the key.'

'Which means?'

Delfosse went inside the building and closed the door into the hallway, before heading for the stairs.

'What are we going to do?'

'Wait. Where's your man?'

He was coming in after them, in fact, wondering whether he ought to speak to his chief or pretend not to recognize him.

'Come here, Girard. Well?'

'Five minutes ago, a man came in. I saw a light in the room, as if someone was using a pocket torch.'

'Here we go, then,' said Maigret.

'Straight in?'

‘I should damn well think so!’

To open the inner door shared by all the residents, they just had to turn the handle, since Belgian apartment blocks have no concierge.

The stairs were unlit. And no light was coming from Adèle’s room.

But when Maigret pushed open the door, confused sounds were heard, as of two men rolling on the floor fighting.

Delvigne had already drawn his revolver. Maigret felt automatically on the left-hand wall, and found the light switch.

Then their eyes met a sight as absurd as it was tragic.

Two men were indeed fighting. But the sudden light and the noise took them both by surprise and they froze, still clasping each other. One hand was gripping a throat. Tousled grey hair.

‘Don’t move!’ ordered Delvigne. ‘Police! Hands up!’

He closed the door without lowering the gun. And Maigret, with a sigh of relief, unwound his muffler, unbuttoned his coat and gasped for air, like a man who was suffering from the heat.

‘Faster than that! Hands up, I said!’

René Delfosse tried to stand but fell over again, since his right leg was wedged under Victor’s.

Delvigne looked as if he would welcome some advice.

Delfosse and the waiter were both on their feet now, pale, dishevelled and taken aback.

Of the two, the young man was the more upset, indeed he appeared devastated and unable to take in what was happening. What was more, he was staring at Victor in stupefaction, as if he had not expected at all to find him there.

Who had he thought he was fighting?

‘Now my friends, let’s all stay put, shall we?’ said Maigret, speaking at last.
‘Is the door shut, Chief Inspector?’

He approached his colleague and whispered a few words. Delvigne went to the window and signalled to Girard to come and meet them on the landing.

‘Get as many men as you can to surround the Gai-Moulin, and don’t let anyone out. But if anyone arrives, let them in.’

And he returned to the bedroom, with its counterpane reminiscent of whipped cream.

Victor stood unmoving. He was the very image of a waiter as cartoonists like to depict them: drooping features and large rheumy eyes, thinning hair usually combed over a bald patch – although, just now, it was ruffled and standing on end.

He was holding his shoulders sideways, as if to give an opponent less purchase, and it would have been hard to guess what his oblique gaze was searching for.

‘It’s not the first time *you’ve* been arrested, I’ll be bound,’ said Maigret with confidence. He was sure of that. You could tell at a glance. Here was a man who had long been expecting to find himself facing the police and who was used to this kind of encounter.

‘I don’t know what you mean. Adèle asked me to come and fetch something for her.’

‘Her lipstick perhaps?’

‘I heard a noise ... And someone came in.’

‘And you jumped on him. In other words, you were looking for the lipstick in the dark. Don’t move! Hands up still, please.’

Both men were lifting weary arms above their heads. Delfosse’s hands were trembling. He tried to wipe his nose with his sleeve, without dropping his arm.

‘And you, what did Adèle ask you to fetch?’

The young man’s teeth were chattering, but he could not answer.

‘Keep them covered, Delvigne.’

And Maigret walked round the room where, on the bedside table, lay the remains of a mutton chop, some breadcrumbs, a glass and a beer bottle, half full. He bent down to look under the bed, shrugged and opened a cupboard that contained only dresses, linen and old shoes with broken heels. Then he noticed a chair near the wardrobe. Standing on it, he felt along the top ledge, and pulled out a leather briefcase.

‘Aha,’ he said, climbing down. ‘This is the lipstick, is it, Victor?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘I mean, it’s whatever you were looking for.’

‘I’ve never seen that briefcase in my life.’

‘Too bad for you, then. What about you, Delfosse?’

‘I ... I swear ...’

He forgot the revolver trained on him and threw himself on the bed, breaking into a paroxysm of sobbing.

‘So, my dear Victor, you don’t want to tell us anything? Not even why you were brawling with this young man?’

And Maigret moved the dirty plate, the glass and the beer bottle to the floor, put the briefcase on the bedside table and opened it.

‘Some papers here that are none of our business, Delvigne! We’ll have to pass them all over to the intelligence people. Ah! Well I never: blueprints for a new machine-gun being produced at the National Armaments Works at Herstal. And these look like the plans for rebuilding a fort. And here are ... some letters in code that will have to be looked at by the specialists.’

In the hearth, the remains of a few coals were still glowing on the grate. Suddenly, when they were least expecting it, Victor rushed forward and made a grab at the papers. Maigret, having sensed what was going to happen, as Delvigne stood hesitating to use his gun, punched the waiter full in the face, and Victor went flying, without having time to throw the documents on the fire.

The pages scattered. Victor put both hands to his cheek, which had discoloured. It had all happened very quickly. But Delfosse almost managed to take the opportunity to escape. In a second, he would have jumped off the bed and run behind Delvigne, if the Belgian police chief had not noticed, and stuck out his leg to trip him up.

‘And now?’ asked Maigret.

‘I’ve got nothing to say,’ said Victor, angrily.

‘I asked you a question.’

‘I didn’t kill Graphopoulos.’

‘So what?’

‘You are a brute! My lawyer—’

‘Fancy that! You already have a lawyer?’

Delvigne was watching young Delfosse, and following the direction of his eyes he looked towards the top of the wardrobe.

‘I think there’s something else up there,’ he said.

‘You could be right,’ said Maigret, climbing back on to the chair.

He felt around for some time, before his hand finally found a blue leather wallet, which he opened.

'Graphopoulos's wallet!' he announced. 'Thousand-franc French banknotes, about thirty of them. And some papers. Aha! An address: *the Gai-Moulin, Rue du Pot-d'Or*. And in different writing: *No one there overnight.*'

Maigret was now taking no notice of anyone else, but following his own thoughts. He looked at one of the coded letters and counted certain symbols:

'One, two, three ... eleven, twelve ... A twelve-letter word. Graphopoulos! It was in the briefcase.'

Steps were heard on the stairs. A nervous knock at the door. And the excited face of Inspector Girard.

'The Gai-Moulin's surrounded. No one will leave. But ... Monsieur Delfosse arrived a few minutes ago, looking for his son. He spoke to Adèle. And then he came out. I thought it best to let him go, and then follow him. When I saw he was heading here, I ran ahead. Listen ... That'll be him on the stairs.'

And indeed they could hear someone's hesitant steps outside, walking along the landing, trying doors, and finally there was a knock.

Maigret himself opened the door, and bowed to the man with the grey moustache, who gave him a contemptuous glare:

'Is my son ...?'

He saw the boy then, looking pitiful, snapped his fingers, and said:

'Right, you! Home!'

Things almost turned ugly. René stared at everyone in panic, clung to the counterpane, and his teeth began chattering desperately again.

'Just a moment,' Maigret interrupted. 'Monsieur Delfosse, would you mind taking a seat.'

The other man viewed the room with distaste.

'You wish to speak to me? And who might you be?'

'Never mind. Chief Inspector Delvigne will tell you that in good time. When your son came home earlier, did you give him a dressing-down?'

'I locked him in his room, and told him to wait for my decision.'

'Which was—'

'I don't know yet. Perhaps to send him abroad to do a stint in a bank or a merchant company. It's time he learned a bit about the world.'

'No, Monsieur Delfosse.'

'What do you mean, no?'

'I simply mean that it's too late. Your son, during the night from Wednesday to Thursday, killed Monsieur Graphopoulos, in order to rob him.'

Maigret put up his hand to intercept the cane with its gold pommel as it was about to descend on him. And with a forceful twist of his wrist he made its owner release it with a moan of pain. Then he considered it calmly, weighed it in his hand and dropped it.

'And I'm pretty sure the crime was committed with this stick.'

Open-mouthed, in the grip of a spasm, René was trying to cry out but no sound came. He was a quivering mass of nerves, a pathetic creature, petrified with fear.

'I hope you are going to explain yourself,' Delfosse senior nevertheless announced. 'And as for you, my dear Chief Inspector, I would have you know that I shall pass on to my friend the public prosecutor—'

Maigret turned to Girard.

'Go and fetch Adèle. Take a car. And you can bring Génaro as well.'

'I think—' Delfosse senior began, approaching Maigret.

'There now, just wait,' said Maigret in the tone with which one calms down a child.

He began pacing the room. And did so uninterruptedly for the seven minutes it took for his orders to be carried out.

The sound of a car engine. Steps on the stairs. And Génaro's voice, protesting:

'You'll have my consul to deal with! This is preposterous! I'm a respectable club owner. And there are fifty customers on my premises, right now.'

When he entered the room, he looked questioningly at Victor.

Victor was magnificent.

'We're done for!' he said simply.

The dancer, half naked under her revealing dress, surveyed her room, shrugging her shoulders in resignation.

'Just answer my questions, mademoiselle. In the course of that evening, did Graphopoulos ask you to come to his hotel room?'

'I didn't go!'

'So he did ask you, then. Therefore he must have told you that he was staying in the Hôtel Moderne, in room 18?'

She gazed at the floor.

'Chabot and Delfosse, sitting at a nearby table, might have overheard. What time did Delfosse get here that night?'

'I—'

'What time?'

'I was asleep. Maybe about five in the morning.'

'And what did he say?'

'He asked me to go away with him. He wanted to take a boat for America. He said he was rich.'

'And you refused?'

'I was sleepy. I told him to come to bed. But that wasn't what he wanted, so I asked him why he was so jumpy, whether perhaps he'd done something wrong.'

'And what did he say?'

'He begged me to let him hide a wallet in my room.'

'And you pointed to the wardrobe, on top of which there was already a briefcase.'

She shrugged again and sighed:

'Too bad for them.'

'Well?'

No answer. Delfosse senior was looking haughtily and suspiciously around.

'I should very much like to know—' he began.

'You'll find out soon enough, Monsieur Delfosse. I would simply ask you to be patient for a moment.'

This was in order to pack his pipe.



11. The New Recruit

‘Let’s start with Paris! With Graphopoulos, a man who comes to ask for police protection, then the next day tries to throw off the inspector assigned to him. Remember what I told you, Delvigne? Something to do with either the mafia or espionage. Well, it’s espionage! Graphopoulos is rich and at a loose end. Cloak-and-dagger stuff tempts him, as it does other people of his type. During his trips abroad, he meets some kind of secret agent, and tells him that he too would like to opt for a life full of mystery and the unexpected. “Secret agent!” Words that make so many idiots daydream. They think the job just consists of ... Well, never mind. Graphopoulos is determined. And the man he approaches doesn’t think he ought to turn away a potentially interesting recruit.

‘But what the general public doesn’t know is that newcomers undergo some kind of initiation. Our Greek is intelligent and wealthy, and he travels a lot. But does he have the necessary savvy and discretion?

‘So he is offered a first mission: he has to go to Liège and steal some documents from a nightclub. This is one way to test his nerve. It’s a make-believe mission. They just send him to other agents working for the same outfit, who will judge whether our man fits the bill. And Graphopoulos is afraid. He had imagined espionage very differently. He’d seen himself walking into palaces, asking ambassadors questions, being invited into every tinpot European court. He doesn’t dare refuse. But he asks the police to watch over him. Then he tells his chief that he is being followed by the police: “I’ve got a French police inspector tailing me. I’d better not go to Liège, had I?” “Never mind that, just get yourself there!”

‘And now he really panics. He tries to evade the surveillance he asked for. He books a seat on a plane for London, buys a train ticket for Berlin and finally gets off here at the Guillemins station. The Gai-Moulin! That’s the club he’s supposed to go to. He doesn’t realize that the owner is a member of the spy ring, that he’s been notified, that this is simply a test, and what’s more, that there aren’t any documents at all in the club for him to steal.

‘A dancer sits down at his table. He asks her to come to his room later that night, because he likes his pleasures. As almost always happens, his libido is heightened by danger. At least, then he won’t be on his own. As a little earnest of things to come, he lets her have his cigarette-case, which she had admired. He watches the people around him. He doesn’t know anything. Or rather he only knows one thing. He has to manage to get himself shut into the club after hours, so that he can look for the documents he’s supposed to find.

‘Génaro has been warned, so he watches him with a smile. Victor, *who also belongs to the ring*, is obsequious and ironic as he pours his champagne.

‘And by chance, someone overhears the address he gives Adèle: Hôtel Moderne, room 18. And at this point we have to move to a different story.’

Maigret looked at Monsieur Delfosse, and at him alone.

‘You’ll have to pardon me, but now I’m going to talk about you. You’re a rich man. You have a wife, a son, mistresses. You lead a life of pleasure, without suspecting that your young son, who is fragile and highly strung, is trying in his own little circle to imitate you. He sees money being splashed out all around him. You give him at once too much money and not enough. For years now, he’s been stealing from you and he even robs his uncles as well! When you’re away, he drives your car. And he has mistresses, too. In short, in every sense of the word he’s a spoiled daddy’s boy. No, don’t argue. Wait till you hear ...

‘He needs a friend, a confidant. He drags Chabot along with him. One day, they’re both broke. They have debts all along the line. And they decide to rob the till at the Gai-Moulin. It happens to be the night Graphopoulos is there. Delfosse and Chabot hide on the cellar steps, when they are assumed to have left. Without Génaro’s knowledge? It doesn’t matter, but I doubt it. He really is an exemplary secret operator. He owns a club. He is duly licensed, as he said just now. He has other people working for him. And he feels all the safer since he acts as a police informer.

'He knows perfectly well Graphopoulos is planning to hide inside the club. He locks up and leaves with Victor. Next day, all he has to do is report back to his chiefs about how the Greek handled it.

'You see, it's all getting a bit complicated. We might say that that evening became the night when everyone was fooled.

'Graphopoulos has been drinking champagne to give himself courage. And now he's alone inside the Gai-Moulin, in the dark. He still has to find the documents he's supposed to take. But he hasn't made a move before a door opens. A match is struck. He's terrified. He was probably terrified to start with anyway. He doesn't have the guts to attack. He pretends to be dead instead. Then he sees his enemies. A couple of kids who are even more scared than he is, and who take to their heels!'

Nobody moved in the room. Nobody seemed to be breathing. All their faces showed the strain, as Maigret went on:

'Graphopoulos, alone again, keeps trying to find the documents requested by his new paymasters. Chabot and Delfosse are so panic-stricken that they bolt down some mussels and chips and then say goodbye to each other in the street.

'But Delfosse is haunted by a memory. Hôtel Moderne, room 18. The words he overheard. That stranger looked as if he was rich. And the young man badly needs money for all the wrong reasons. To get into a hotel at night is child's play. The room key will still be on the hook. And since Graphopoulos is dead, he won't be coming back!

'So he goes to the hotel. The night porter is nodding off and doesn't challenge him. He gets upstairs, and searches the traveller's suitcase. Then he hears steps in the corridor, the door opens.

'And it's Graphopoulos himself! Who is supposed to be dead! Delfosse is so terrified that without thinking, he hits him with all his might, in the shadows, with his cane, the cane with the gold pommel belonging to his father, which he had borrowed as usual that evening.

'He's beside himself, hardly responsible for his actions. He takes the wallet, and flees. Perhaps he checks its contents under a street lamp. He sees thousands of francs, and has the idea of getting Adèle to run away with him, Adèle whom he's always fancied.

'To live the high life abroad! With a woman! Like a real man! Like his father!

‘But Adèle is fast asleep. She has no desire to go. He hides the wallet in her room, because he’s scared. He doesn’t suspect that for months, or perhaps for years, Génaro and Victor have been using the same hiding place for the documents they handle for their spy ring. Because she’s part of it! They’re all in it!

‘Delfosse has only kept the Belgian banknotes, two thousand francs’ worth, from the wallet. The rest, in French currency, is too compromising.

‘Next day, he reads the papers. The victim, *his* victim, has been found not in the hotel, but in a public park. He can’t understand this. He’s on tenterhooks. He finds Chabot again and drags him along with him. He pretends he’s robbed his uncle to explain the two thousand francs he’s carrying. He has to get rid of them somehow. So he gets Chabot to do it, because he’s a coward. Worse than a coward, actually. Rather there’s something pathological about it. In his heart, he envies his friend for not sharing the guilt. He’d like to compromise him. Without daring to do it openly.

‘Hasn’t he always held something against his friend? Envy, hate, rather complex feelings. Because Chabot’s hands are clean, or at least they were. Whereas young Delfosse is plagued by disturbing desires. That must be the explanation for their strange friendship, and the need Delfosse feels to be constantly accompanied by his sidekick.

‘He kept on going round to Chabot’s house to haul him out. He couldn’t stand to be alone. And he got his friend entangled in his compromises, his little thefts within the family that will never come to court.

‘But Chabot doesn’t come back from the washroom: he’s been arrested. Delfosse doesn’t try to find out what’s happened to him. He starts drinking. He needs someone else to drink with him. Because if there’s one thing he can’t stand it’s being on his own. He gets drunk, goes home with the dancer, and falls asleep.

‘At dawn, he panics again, at the situation he’s in. He probably sees the police inspector in the street outside. He doesn’t dare touch Graphopoulos’s money on top of the wardrobe. There are only French notes there, too easy to identify. So he prefers to rob Adèle.

‘What is he hoping for at this stage? Nothing. And from now on, everything he does fits that logic.

'He realizes dimly that he isn't going to escape from the law. But he dares not give himself up. Ask Chief Inspector Delvigne where the police go to look – nine times out of ten successfully – for criminals like this. In some seedy bar! Delfosse needs a drink, noise, girls. He picks a bar near the station at random. He tries to get the waitress to go upstairs with him. When she refuses, he drags in a girl from the street. He pays for drinks all round. He flashes his banknotes about, gives them away. He's frantic. When he's arrested, he tells totally preposterous lies. He lies hopelessly. He tells lies just for the sake of it, like a vicious child. He's prepared to say anything, give a mass of detail. Another characteristic which seems to fit the profile.

'But then they tell him the murderer has been arrested. (That was me, by the way!) He's allowed to go home. And he learns a little later that the assassin has killed himself, after confessing.

'Does he guess it's a trap? He may have done, at some level. But now he is in any case driven by the need to suppress any evidence of his involvement. That's why I invented this little game, which may have seemed childish. There were two ways of driving Delfosse to confess: the one I've used, or else leaving him alone for hours in the dark, which he fears as much as he does being alone. He'd have broken down and confessed anything you like, even adding extra details.

'I realized he was guilty the moment I learned that the two thousand francs didn't come from the chocolate shop. After that, everything he said and did only strengthened my opinion. It's a banal case, in spite of its morbid nature and apparent complexity.

'But I still needed to get to the bottom of something else: the other case, the Graphopoulos case. Consequently, there were other people guilty of something. The announcement of my death, that is the death of the supposed murderer, brought them out of their holes. Delfosse came to get the compromising wallet. Victor came to look for—'

Maigret looked slowly round those present.

'How long has Génaro been using your lodgings to hide dangerous papers, Adèle?'

She shrugged her shoulders with indifference, a woman who had long been expecting disaster to strike.

'Years! It was Génaro that brought me here from Paris, where I was starving.'

‘Do you confess, Génaro?’

‘I will speak only in the presence of my lawyer.’

‘Ah, you too, like Victor?’

Delfosse senior said nothing: his head was lowered, his eyes fixed on his cane, the very cane that had killed Graphopoulos.

‘My son isn’t responsible for his actions,’ he murmured suddenly.

‘I’m aware of that!’

And as the father looked at him, both embarrassed and disturbed, Maigret said:

‘You’ll tell me now he has inherited from you certain flaws liable to reduce his sense of responsibility—’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Look at yourself and him in the mirror!’

And that was all. Three months later, Maigret was at home in Boulevard Richard-Lenoir going through his mail, which the concierge had just brought up.

‘Anything interesting?’ asked Madame Maigret, who was shaking a rug from the open window.

‘A card from your sister, saying she’s going to have a baby.’

‘Another one!’

‘And a letter from Belgium.’

‘Who from?’

‘Nothing very fascinating. My friend, Chief Inspector Delvigne, says he’s going to send me a pipe in the post, and is giving me news of some sentences that have been passed.’

And he read out in an undertone:

‘Génaro got five years’ hard labour, Victor three, and the girl Adèle was acquitted, for lack of evidence.’

‘Who are those people?’ asked Madame Maigret. For all that she was married to a detective chief inspector of the Police Judiciaire, she had kept all the innocence of a true daughter of rural France.

‘They’re of no interest. These men ran a nightclub in Liège. It didn’t have many customers, but it was the hub of a spy ring.’

‘And “the girl Adèle”?’

‘She was the dancer at the club. Run-of-the-mill dancer.’

‘And you knew her?’

There was suddenly a hint of jealousy in Madame Maigret’s voice.

‘I went to her room, just the once.’

‘Well, well.’

‘Now you’re talking like Monsieur Delvigne himself! I did go to her place, but in the company of about half a dozen other people.’

‘Is she pretty?’

‘She’s not bad. The youngsters were mad about her.’

‘Just the youngsters?’

Maigret opened another letter with a Belgian stamp.

‘Here we are, here’s a photo of one of them.’

And he held out a snapshot of a young man, whose thin shoulders looked even more frail in his uniform. The background was the funnel of a steamer.

... and I’m taking the liberty of sending you a photograph of my son, who left Antwerp this week on board the SS Élisabethville, bound for the Congo. I hope that the tough life in the colonies ...

‘Who’s that?’

‘One of the youngsters who was in love with Adèle.’

‘Did he commit a crime?’

‘He drank some glasses of port in a nightclub where he would have done better never to set foot.’

‘Was he her lover?’

‘Absolutely not! The nearest he came to it was that he once watched her getting dressed.’

And Madame Maigret concluded:

‘Men! They’re all the same!’

Under the pile of letters was a black-edged envelope which Maigret did not show his wife.

... in his eighteenth year, fortified by the sacraments of the church, René-Joseph-Arthur Delfosse passed away at the Clinique Sainte-Rosalie ...

The Clinique Sainte-Rosalie in Liège is a nursing home for rich patients with mental disorders. At the bottom of the card, three words: *Pray for him.*

And Maigret recalled Monsieur Delfosse, with his wife, his factory, his mistresses. And Graphopoulos, who had wanted to play secret agents, because he had nothing to do and thought it would be glamorous, like in spy novels.

A week later, in a nightclub in Montmartre, a woman smiled at him over the empty glass which the management had placed on his table for convention's sake.

It was Adèle.

'I promise you, I had no idea what they were actually getting up to. Got to live, haven't you?'

And naturally, she was ready to 'get up to something' all over again.

'I got sent this picture of the kid. You know he was an office-boy or something?'

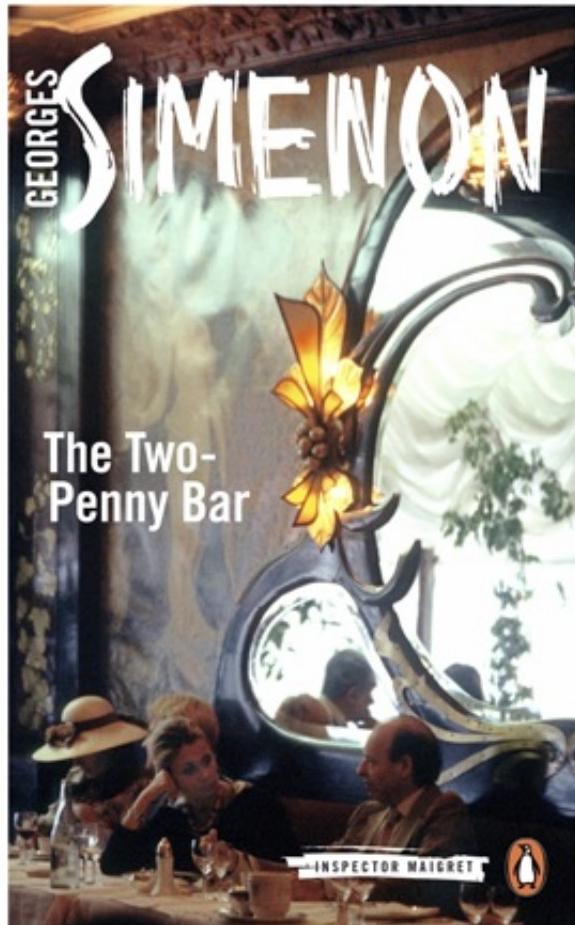
From a powder-stained handbag she produced a snapshot. The same one Maigret had received. Of a lanky boy, not yet grown-up, who looked frail in his over-large uniform, and who was trying for the first time to look brave under the pith helmet. No doubt a third copy was being shown round in Rue de la Loi to the lodgers, Mademoiselle Pauline and Monsieur Bogdanowski.

'He looks so grown up, don't you think? If only he doesn't catch a fever!'

And now other young men were frequenting the Gai-Moulin, which was back in business under new management.



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NEXT INSPECTOR MAIGRET NOVEL**



**INSPECTOR
MAIGRET**



1. Saturday with Monsieur Basso

A radiant late afternoon. The sunshine almost as thick as syrup in the quiet streets of the Left Bank. And everything – the people's faces, the countless familiar sounds of the street – exuded a joy to be alive.

There are days like this, when ordinary life seems heightened, when the people walking down the street, the trams and cars all seem to exist in a fairy tale.

It was 27 June. When Maigret arrived at the gate of the Santé prison he found the guard gazing soppily at a little white cat that was playing with the dog from the dairy.

Some days the pavement must be more resonant underfoot: Maigret's footsteps echoed in the vast courtyard. He walked to the end of a corridor, where he asked a warder:

'Does he know? ...'

'Not yet.'

A key turned in the lock. The bolt was pulled back. A high-ceilinged cell, very clean. A man stood up, looking unsure as to which expression to adopt.

'All right, Lenoir?' the inspector asked.

The man nearly smiled. But a thought came into his mind and his face hardened. He frowned suspiciously, and his mouth twisted into a sneer for a moment or two. Then he shrugged his shoulders and held out his hand.

'I see,' he said.

'What do you see?'

A resigned smile.

'Give it a rest, eh? You must be here because ...'

'I'm here because I'm off on holiday tomorrow and ...'

The prisoner gave a hollow laugh. He was a tall young man. His dark hair was brushed back. He had regular features, fine brown eyes. His thin dark moustache set off the whiteness of his teeth, which were as sharp as a rodent's.

'That's very kind of you, inspector ...'

He stretched, yawned, put down the lid of the toilet in the corner of the cell which had been left up.

'Excuse the mess ...'

Then suddenly, looking Maigret in the eye, he said:

'They've turned down the appeal, haven't they?'

There was no point in lying. He knew already. He started pacing up and down.

'I knew they would ... so when is it? ... Tomorrow?'

Even so, his voice faltered and his eyes drank in the glimmer of light from the narrow window high up the cell wall.

At that moment, the evening papers being sold on the café terraces announced:

The President of the Republic has rejected the appeal of Jean Lenoir, the young leader of the Belleville gang. The execution will take place tomorrow at dawn.

It was Maigret himself who had arrested Lenoir three months previously, in a hotel in Rue Saint-Antoine. A split second later and the bullet the gangster fired at him would have caught him full in the chest rather than ending up lodged in the ceiling.

In spite of this, the inspector bore him no grudge; indeed, he had taken something of a shine to him. Firstly, perhaps, because Lenoir was so young – a twenty-two-year-old who had been in and out of prison since the age of fifteen. But also because he had a self-confidence about him.

He had had accomplices. Two of them were arrested at the same time as him. They were both guilty and on this occasion – an armed robbery – they probably played a bigger part than the boss himself. However, Lenoir got them off the hook. He took the whole blame on himself and refused to 'spill the beans'.

He never put on an act, wasn't too full of himself. He didn't blame society for his actions.

'Looks like I've lost,' was all he said.

It was all over. More precisely, it would be all over when the sun, which was casting a golden strip of light on the cell wall, next rose.

Almost unconsciously, Lenoir felt the back of his neck. He shivered, turned pale, gave a derisive laugh:

‘It feels weird ...’

Then suddenly, in an outburst of bitterness:

‘There are others who deserve this, and I wish they were going down with me!’

He looked at Maigret, hesitated, walked round the narrow cell once more, muttering:

‘Don’t get excited, I’m not going to put anyone in the frame now ... but all the same ...’

The inspector avoided looking at him. He could feel a confession coming. And he knew the man was so prickly that the slightest reaction or sign of interest on his part would make him clam up.

‘There’s a little place known as the “Two-Penny Bar” ... I don’t suppose you’re familiar with it, but if you happen to find yourself in the neighbourhood you might be interested to know that one of the regulars there has more reason than me to be putting his head on the block tomorrow ...’

He was still pacing up and down. He couldn’t stay still. It was hypnotic. It was the only sign of his inner turmoil.

‘But you won’t get him ... Look, without giving anything away, I can tell you this much ... I don’t know why this is coming back to me now. Maybe because I was just a kid. I couldn’t have been more than sixteen ... Me and my friend used to do a bit of filching around the dance halls. He must be in a sanatorium by now – he already had a cough back then ...’

Was all this talk just to give himself the illusion of being alive, to prove to himself that he was still a man?

‘One night – it must have been around three in the morning – we were walking down the street. It doesn’t matter which street. Just a street. We saw a door opening ahead of us. There was a car parked by the roadside. This guy came out, pushing another guy in front of him. No, not pushing. Imagine you’re carrying a shop dummy and trying to make it look like it’s your friend walking next to you. He put him in the car and got into the driver’s seat. My friend shot

me a look and we both jumped up on to the rear bumper. In those days they called me the Cat ... that tells you all you need to know! The guy drove all over the place. He seemed to be looking for something, but seemed to keep losing his way. In the end we realized what he'd been looking for, because we arrived at the Canal Saint-Martin. You've worked it out, haven't you? It was over in the time it takes to open and shut a car door. One body at the bottom of the canal ...

'Smooth as you like! The guy in the car must have put lead weights in the stiff's pockets, because he sank like a stone.'

'We kept our cool. Another wink and we're back on the bumper. Then it was just a case of checking the client's address. He stopped in the Place de la République to have a glass of rum at the only café that was open. Then he drove his car to the garage and went home. We could see his silhouette through the curtains as he got undressed ...'

'We blackmailed him for two years, Victor and me. We were novices. We were afraid of asking for too much ... a few hundred at a time ...'

'Then one day he moved house, and we lost him ... Then three months ago I ran into him again at the Two-Penny Bar. He didn't even recognize me ...'

Lenoir spat on the ground, automatically searched his pockets for his cigarettes.

'You'd think they'd let me smoke, in my situation,' he muttered.

The shaft of sunlight above their heads had disappeared. Footsteps could be heard out in the corridor.

'It's not that I'm making out that I'm better than I am, but this guy I'm telling you about should be up there with me, tomorrow, on the ...'

Suddenly the beads of sweat stood out on his forehead, and his legs buckled. He sat down on the edge of his bunk.

'Leave me ...' he sighed. 'No, don't ... don't leave me alone today ... It's better to talk to someone ... Hey, do you want me to tell you about Marcelle, the woman who ...'

The door opened. The prisoner's lawyer hesitated when he saw Maigret. He had pasted on his professional smile, so that his client wouldn't be able to guess that his appeal had been turned down.

'I have good news ...' he began.

'I know!'

Then, to Maigret:

‘Guess I won’t be seeing you, inspector … Well, we’ve all got a job to do. By the way, I wouldn’t bother checking out the Two-Penny Bar. This guy is just as cunning as you …’

Maigret offered his hand. He saw his nostrils twitch, his dark moustache moisten with sweat, the two front teeth biting the lower lip.

‘Better this than typhoid!’ Lenoir joked, with a forced laugh.

Maigret didn’t go away on holiday; there was a case involving forged bonds that took up nearly all of his time. He had never heard of the Two-Penny Bar. He asked around among his colleagues.

‘Don’t know it. Whereabouts? On the Marne? The lower Seine?’

Lenoir was sixteen at the time of the events he had described. So the case was six years old, and one evening Maigret read the reports for that year.

There was nothing sensational. Missing persons, as always. A woman chopped up into pieces, whose head was never found. As for the Canal Saint-Martin, it had thrown up no less than seven corpses.

The forged bonds turned out to be a complicated case, involving many lines of inquiry. Then he had to drive Madame Maigret to her sister’s in Alsace, where she stayed for a month every year.

Paris was emptying. The asphalt grew sticky underfoot. Pedestrians sought the shady side of the street, and the café terraces were full.

Expecting you Sunday without fail. Love from everyone.

Madame Maigret’s summons arrived when her husband had failed to turn up for a fortnight. It was Saturday, 23 July. He tidied up his desk and warned Jean, the office boy at the Quai des Orfèvres, that he probably wouldn’t be back before Monday evening.

As he was about to leave, he noticed the brim of his bowler, which had been torn for weeks. His wife had told him a dozen times to buy a new one.

‘You’ll have people throwing you coins in the street …’

He spotted a hatshop in Boulevard Saint-Michel. He tried on a few, but they were all too small for his head.

‘I’m sure this one will be just right …’ the spotty young shop assistant kept insisting.

Maigret was never more miserable than when he was trying things on in shops. In the mirror he was looking in, he spotted a man's back and head, and on the head a top hat. As the man was dressed in hunting tweeds, he cut a rather droll figure.

'No! I wanted something a bit older-looking,' he was saying. 'It's not meant to be smart.'

Maigret was waiting for the assistant to return from the back of the shop with some new hats for him to try on.

'It's just for a little play-acting ... a mock marriage which we're putting on with a few friends at the Two-Penny Bar ... there'll be a bride, mother of the bride, page-boys, the lot! ... Just like a village wedding! ... Now do you see what I'm after? ... I'm playing the part of the village mayor ...'

The customer gave a hearty laugh. He was about thirty-five, thickset, with rosy cheeks; he had the air of a prosperous businessman.

'Maybe one with a flat brim ...'

'Hold on! I think we've got just the thing you're after in the workshop. It was a cancelled order ...'

Maigret was brought another pile of bowlers. The first one he tried on fitted. But he dallied and made sure he left the shop just before the man with the opera hat. He hailed a taxi, just in case he needed it.

He did. The man came out of the shop, got into a car parked next to the pavement and drove off in the direction of Rue Vieille-du-Temple.

There he spent half an hour in a second-hand shop and emerged with a flat cardboard box, which obviously contained a suit to go with his top hat.

Then on to the Champs-Élysées, Avenue de Wagram. A small bar on a street corner. He stayed there only five minutes and left accompanied by a buxom, jovial-looking woman who must have been in her thirties.

Twice Maigret looked at his watch. His first train had already gone. The second would be leaving in a quarter of an hour. He shrugged his shoulders and told the taxi driver:

'Keep following him.'

Much as he had expected, the car drew up in front of an apartment block on Avenue Niel. The couple hurried in through the entrance. Maigret waited a quarter of an hour, then went in, taking note of the brass plate:

Bachelor apartments by the month or by the day.

In a smart office which had a whiff of adultery he found a perfumed manageress.

‘Police! ... The couple who just came in here ...’

‘Which couple?’

But she didn’t put up much of a struggle.

‘Very respectable people, both married. They come twice a week ...’

On his way out, the inspector glanced through the car windscreen at the identity plate.

Marcel Basso,
32, Quai d’Austerlitz, Paris.

Not a breath of wind. The air was warm and heavy. All the trams and buses heading for the railway stations were packed. Taxis full of deckchairs, fishing-rods, shrimp nets and suitcases. The asphalt glistened blue, and the café terraces resounded with the clatter of saucers and glasses.

‘After all, three weeks ago Lenoir was ...’

There hadn’t been much talk about it. It was an everyday case – he was what you might call a professional criminal. Maigret remembered the quivering moustache and sighed as he looked at his watch.

Too late now. Madame Maigret would be waiting with her sister at the barrier of the little station that evening and would not fail to mutter:

‘Always the same!’

The taxi driver was reading a newspaper. The man with the top hat left first, scanned the street both ways before signalling to his companion, who was lurking in the entrance.

They stopped in Place des Ternes. He saw them kiss through the rear windscreen. They were still holding hands after the woman had hailed a taxi and the man was ready to drive off.

‘Do you want me to follow?’ the driver asked Maigret.

‘Might as well.’

At least he’d found someone who knew the Two-Penny Bar!

Quai d’Austerlitz. A huge sign:

Marcel Basso
Coal importer – various sources
Wholesale and retail

Domestic deliveries by the sack
Special summer prices

A yard surrounded by a black fence. On the opposite side of the street a quayside bearing the firm's name, with moored barges and a newly unloaded pile of coal.

In the middle of the yard a large house, in the style of a villa. Monsieur Basso parked his car, automatically brushed his shoulders to remove any female hairs and went into his house.

Maigret saw him reappear at the wide-open window of a room on the first floor. He was with a tall, attractive blonde woman. They were both laughing and talking in an excited fashion. Monsieur Basso was trying on his top hat and looking at himself in the mirror.

They were packing suitcases. There was a maid in a white apron in the room.

A quarter of an hour later – it was now five o'clock – the family came downstairs. A boy of about ten led the way, brandishing an air rifle. Then came the servant, Madame Basso, her husband, a gardener carrying the cases ...

The group was brimming with good humour. Cars drove past, heading for the country. At Gare de Lyon the specially extended holiday trains whistled shrilly.

Madame Basso got in next to her husband. The boy climbed into the back seat among the cases and lowered the windows. The car was nothing fancy, just a standard family car, dark blue, nearly new.

A few minutes later they were driving towards Villeneuve-Saint-Georges. Then they took the road towards Corbeil. They drove through the town and ended up on a potholed road along the bank of the Seine.

Mon Loisir

That was the name of the villa, on the river between Morsang and Seine-Port. It looked newly built, bricks still shiny, the paintwork fresh, flowers in the garden that looked as if they had been washed that morning. A diving-board over the river, rowing-boats by the bank.

'Do you know the area?' Maigret asked his driver.

'A bit ...'

'Is there somewhere to stay around here?'

'In Morsang, the Vieux-Garçon ... Or further on, at Seine-Port, Chez Marius ...'

'And the Two-Penny Bar?'

The driver shrugged.

The taxi was too conspicuous to stay there much longer by the roadside. The Bassos had unloaded their car. No more than ten minutes had elapsed before Madame Basso appeared in the garden dressed in a sailor's outfit, with an American naval cap on her head.

Her husband must have been more eager to try out his fancy dress, for he appeared at a window buttoned up in an improbable-looking frock coat, with the top hat perched on his head.

'What do you reckon?'

'Shouldn't you be wearing the sash?'

'What sash?'

'Mayors all wear a tricolour sash ...'

Canoes glided slowly by on the river. In the distance, a tug blew its siren. The sun was sinking behind the trees on the hillside further downstream.

'Let's try the Vieux-Garçon!' said Maigret.

The inn had a large terrace next to the Seine. Boats of all sorts were moored to the bank, while a dozen or so cars were parked behind the building.

'Do you want me to wait for you?'

'I don't know yet.'

The first person he met was a woman dressed all in white, who almost ran into him. She was wearing orange blossom in her hair. She was being chased by a young man in a swimming-costume. They were both laughing. Some other people were observing the scene from the front steps of the inn.

'Hey, keep your dirty paws off the bride!' someone shouted.

'At least until after the wedding!'

The bride stopped, out of breath, and Maigret recognized the lady from Avenue Niel, the one who visited the apartment with Monsieur Basso twice a week.

A man in a green rowing-boat was putting away his fishing tackle, his brow furrowed, as if he were performing some delicate and difficult operation.

'Five Pernods, five!'

A young man came out of the inn, his face plastered with greasepaint and rouge. He was made up to look like a freckly, ruddy-cheeked peasant.

'What do you think?'

‘You should have red hair!’

A car arrived. Some people got out, already dressed up for the village wedding. There was a woman in a puce silk dress which trailed along the ground. Her husband had stuffed a cushion under his waistcoat to simulate a paunch and was wearing a boat chain that was meant to look like a watch chain.

The sun’s rays turned red. The leaves on the trees barely stirred. A canoe drifted downstream; its passenger, stripped to the waist, sat at the back, doing no more than lazily steer it with a paddle.

‘What time are the carriages due to arrive?’

Maigret hung around, feeling out of place.

‘Have the Bassos arrived?’

‘They passed us on the way!’

Suddenly, someone came and stood in front of Maigret, a man of about thirty, already nearly bald, his face made up like a clown’s. He had a mischievous glint in his eyes. He spoke with a pronounced English accent:

‘Here’s someone to play the notary!’

He wasn’t completely drunk. He wasn’t completely sober, either. The rays of the setting sun turned his face purple; his eyes were bluer than the river.

‘You’ll be the notary, won’t you?’ he asked with the familiarity of a drunkard.
‘Of course you will, old chap. We’ll have a great time.’

He took Maigret’s arm and added:

‘Let’s have a Pernod.’

Everyone laughed. A woman muttered:

‘He’s got a nerve, that James.’

But James wasn’t bothered. He dragged Maigret back to the *Vieux-Garçon*.

‘Two large Pernods!’

He was laughing at his own little joke as they were served two glasses full to the brim.

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